

1 Corinthians 13

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[0 : 00] So, 1 Corinthians 13, if you'll excuse me just before I spontaneously ignite, 1 Corinthians 13, and a very, very kind of well-known, familiar chapter all about love, this love that we are to show one another, which is a kind of a re-echoing and a rebounding in our earthly relationships of the love that God has shown to us as he's drawn us into a living relationship with himself.

So, what we're reading about here is the echoing around the place of the love which is sounded down to us from God. And I want to just say right at the beginning that what we've got through here is really an echo of Christ and his character.

It becomes a little more clear in the third section. Paul has the three parts of this beautifully crafted chapter. So, verses 1, 2, and 3 is all about the absence of love, which is a problem in Corinth. And then 4 through 7 is all about the character of love. And 8 through 12 is all about the endurance of love or the eternal nature of this love, the lasting quality of love.

Of course, the love that he's talking about all the way through here is that kind of agape love, the love which is shown to those who have positively demerited the love.

[1 : 46] So, this is love as gift. This is love as gift in the face of sometimes rejection, misunderstanding, disbelief, whatever. This is love which goes against the flow of play, so to speak.

We might encounter a few unconscious World Cup analogies as we go. This is the kind of love that Scots people show towards the English at this stage in the tournament.

And the English show towards the Scots. This is just a great big kind of group hug, you know. The passage is often used at weddings. And it's chosen by brides and grooms sometimes because it's all about love and they're getting married and that's all about love.

And then, of course, you get some kind of clever clogged preacher saying, well, this isn't about romantic love. This isn't about eros. This is about agape. Which is a stupid thing to say because if ever there was any environment where you needed love against the flow of play, it was being married.

If ever there was a place where agape was absolutely essential, then, and O'Marger would testify to this, it's agape, it's in marriage.

[3 : 05] And in every other form of human relating. So, when we come together in this united house that God is building, this, as Paul has been describing already in chapter 12, this building that God is constructing, this temple for His dwelling, then, as we relate, as we get on with one another, then we need this.

We need to show it. It is not simply an imperative that lies upon each of us to love in this way. It is a need of what we have to receive from one another.

If we're to grow into the kind of place that God inhabits, if we're going to become the kind of body that expresses God's character.

So, we're going to look at the passage in some detail. We're going to bear in mind the consequence, the context that the Corinthian Christians were kind of going overboard on the gifts, but handling them with such immaturity and with such selfishness that really God's good gifts were corrupting them.

And Paul is really addressing that. There's a sort of a fairly standard thing you'll find in most commentaries that this is a digression. Personally, I don't buy that it's a digression.

[4 : 40] I think it's actually central to the argument that Paul has begun way back somewhere in about chapter 11, maybe even earlier.

He's sort of just been bringing in the thought of how they get on together, and he's actually going to build on this when he gets to chapter 14. And as we read, this flows out of what he's saying at the end of chapter 12 about the most excellent way to exercise the gifts.

So, first of all, the absence. What happens if we concentrate on our giftedness, that is, our abilities, the ones that God has given us that are gifts for the good of the fellowship and for the glory of God? What happens when we focus on those? Now, I don't know if here in Bonicor, speaking in the tongues of men and of angels too much is like a big problem for you.

I don't know if you're kind of a bit overburdened with folk exercising the gift of prophecy and mountain moving. I mean, you've redone the place really nicely, but that's nothing compared to what we're looking at here.

[6 : 07] But what we need to understand is that what the problem in Corinth was, was ability over character, of personal demonstrated powers over relating in a godly way.

And of course, what Paul is saying is that not simply that you need to love one another, and he's not saying you need to love one another a lot.

He's saying, if you don't exercise love, then all those powers and abilities that you've got, and the ones he lists here were prized in Corinth, and some of them, like prophecy, Paul is not knocking them at all, as we would find if we went on in chapter 14.

But if we prize having those, if our ambition is to be able to demonstrate some of these supernatural powers and impress everybody, and we do not have love, then not only individually, but the quality of the fellowship, get it as a corporate thing, will be awful.

Because look at the way Paul writes, verse 1, if I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, what am I?

[7 : 36] I'm an absolute pain in the neck. I am annoying to people. I'm the kind of person that everybody would want to shut up. So, I don't, I'm not just, you know, slightly defective.

If it's just like I'm really bad, I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have a gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains but do not have love, I am a zero.

I'm not just, you know, somebody who's got some credibility but they could have more. 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.

So, even when we are using our activities to gain things from God or a good reputation, whatever they be, and there will be equivalence within your own fellowship to giving all you possess to the poor and giving over your body to hardship.

There will be equivalence to that. If we're doing stuff to buy credit for ourselves, yet we have no love, we gain absolutely nothing.

[9 : 05] We are wasting our time. We become, as Basil Fawty once said to Manuel, a waste of space. Those of you who are certain, vintage.

This is challenging for us if we're to take it in. We have an informal point scoring system in most churches.

Partly it's to do with the hierarchical structure of our churches, but also it's to do with, like, how popular or how influential we can be, or how well known we are, or how much people want to speak to us afterwards rather than other people.

We have these informal gradings. That just happens when people get together. We're not immune from that just because we're saved.

Shockingly, when you become a Christian, you don't become a different species. And what we read in verses 1 to 3 tells us that if we don't have love, we're not even scoring any points.

[10 : 25] It is the greatest thing. It is the most excellent way. It is essential.

It is the primary measure of the worth of what we do individually and as a fellowship. If people come in and experience terrific abilities being demonstrated in certain ways, but do not feel the love, are not loved in whatever way that's going to show.

They're not respected. If they're not greeted warmly, if they're not treated with a warmth and generosity of humanity that represents our maker, then whatever else we might think about ourselves, we're not loving.

We're nothing. Now, I say this because as I look around, I see within our kind of broader evangelical constituency in the West, this kind of point scoring thing gone mad.

And so we take numbers as a sign of success. We take success organizationally as a sign of quality.

[11 : 59] We take sort of being well-known and being the church that everyone will flock to as some sort of sign that God must be really impressed with us.

We use language to locate ourselves socially within the evangelical world so that our language becomes a kind of tribal identifier.

And we use biblical language in order to do that. And why, if you go to this city or that city, wouldn't you go to that church because everybody knows about it?

And a church can develop programs and systems and structures and activities and a brand which is terribly impressive if you're in the market for that kind of thing.

And you can go there and you can do what one of our kids did going to such a well-known church and just sit in time how long it takes for somebody to come and speak to you.

[13 : 15] The first Sunday she kind of WhatsApped us saying, if you're still sitting in church as a visitor on your own having to WhatsApp your parents something's gone wrong.

So on the third visit she gave it 20 minutes and walked out. People were busy. People were busy scurrying around doing gospel things like ignoring visitors.

Remember that Paul is talking not simply about individual giftedness versus individual loving. He's talking about the quality of this whole fellowship in Corinth. love. So the absence of love is a key indicator that something is seriously wrong.

We find the same kind of message all through one John where John puts it in one respect even more starkly than Paul does.

He says, if you claim to have the truth but you're not walking in it that is, if it's not affecting your conduct you deceive yourself and the truth is not even in you. And one of the key ways in one John of demonstrating of walking in the truth is to love one another.

[14 : 46] So you can surround yourself with the activities of a Christian environment and deceive yourself into thinking that thereby you're doing okay and be a million miles from the truth.

So having spoken about what the absence of love is like he goes on to write about in this beautifully crafted middle section about what love is.

What is it that is the most excellent way? What is it that if we don't have we're a zilch? So here is a useful little checklist for ourselves.

Here is the kind of personality appraisal questionnaire that you might encounter sometimes in your career or your place of work.

Here is kind of a Myers-Briggs FIRO-B trans oceans colors insights call it what you will which ones you might have come across in your place.

[16 : 05] Here is if you would care to do this a checklist for others. this could also be a very useful 360 for those of you who in your workplace have ever had a 360 degree review in which you get those who report to you and those who are your peers and those to whom you report to fill in a questionnaire about you anonymously online.

it is unfortunately anonymous because when you get the results you do want to work out exactly who said what about you. It's a very interesting thing to do to give verses 4 through 7 to your mates to your family and score from like 1 to 5 on each of these 14 dimensions.

I say that. I've been a Christian since 1973. I've been married since 1984. I was church minister for 27 years and I've never done that but it strikes me as being kind of an interesting thing to do sometime.

So am I patient? Well I'm patient up to a point am I kind?

How does kindness show? For many kindness shows by somebody just cutting you some slack.

Kindness shows in thoughtfulness which does something for you.

[17 : 48] Kindness shows in just giving you the benefit of the damned. Kindness is one of the ways which is used to describe Jesus who is called in the scriptures the loving kindness of our God.

That's not a some sort of vague quality when the loving kindness of our God appeared he saved us. that's not some sort of platonic thing that floats around in the world in the ether.

It's a person. That person turns out to be a he and he saved us. It's Jesus. It does not envy.

It does not envy when another church seems to be doing better. does not envy those who seem to be doing very well in their careers. It does not envy those who seem to be more influential.

It does not boast. There's a shot, for those of you who have heard me preaching or have heard me use this picture before, there's a shot you can play in squash called a boast shot.

[19 : 10] and you play a boast shot from the back of the court against the wall and you hit the ball really hard and low, so it hits the ball low, and you put some spin on it so it goes low and then goes way high and hits the end wall and just plops down.

Very effective shot to have done against you. It's a very enviable shot and you'll be very proud of it if you made it and it can really make you angry.

So if you're loving, never use that against anybody, okay? It's more than it seems to be. It bigs itself up. We have examples of that in the political world.

We should never have an example of it in the Christian world, and yet we do of celebrity ministers, of attention seeking ministers. It is not proud.

It does not dishonor others. How easy that is to do in church, or certainly out with the church building, but it can happen in the church building too.

[20 : 38] We can dishonor one another. We can speak about one another in ways which we really ought not to do. We can, with subtle innuendos, do people down. A little hint of some unsoundness here, a little side allusion to somebody's lack of commitment or something that their kids might have done, or whatever.

We can do this dishonoring of one another. It is not self-seeking. So, one of the things we were thinking about this morning is how love turns us out and centers us in other people, rather than and corrects that constant self-referential thing.

It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. There are people in some churches whose temper is like on a hair trigger, and at the slightest whiff of some doctrinal deviance from their particular line on revelation or something like that, they're going to go off on one.

And you listen to it and you think, are you saved? Is the Spirit in you? Are you saved? It keeps no record of wrongs, particularly no record of wrongs done three weeks last Tuesday against me personally, which I can remember in considerable detail, thank you very much, but I'm not going to remind you of them.

We can, in our fellowships, pile up a record of wrongs. We do this to protect ourselves. We do this to feel better about ourselves.

[22 : 31] Sometimes it's because people are just mean and nasty and like to use information against people. Sometimes it's just we're so insecure that we can't feel really good about ourselves unless we can put others down.

That's the way we feel up. So we keep a record of wrongs. And if the pages are getting a bit thin, we can invent some very easily and extrapolate from others.

Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. Evil there we ought perhaps to take not so much as downright wickedness, but the misfortunes that can befall a person because they've made daft mistakes.

Of course these are all interconnected. There are some people who will feel quite proud of the fact that they haven't done what such and such has done. Remember the Pharisee praying in the temple over against the sinner and after he's ticked off his list of virtuous activities he says I thank you that I am not like that person that sinner.

Some people are never quite so satisfied as when they see others even within their Christian fellowship getting their comeuppance. There's no love in that.

[24 : 08] It's sick. Love rejoices with the truth. Not just in true statements but it rejoices when the truth is translated into action and results in people's lives.

Rejoices with the truth as it is enjoyed and lived and seen in behaviors and attitudes. And then he's got this string of always.

Always protects. Always trusts. Always hopes. Always perseveres. You only do something like that always if it is a deeply natural instinct.

So you don't have to think about it every time. It's just one of your drivers. It is an impulse that is part of you. So there are some people who like if it moves they want to feed it.

These people are called mothers. often. So you know you bring your mates around to the house and like from nowhere food appears for them.

[25 : 22] Surprisingly they keep coming back. it's that impulse. It's that impulse. It's that impulse. It's that impulse to protect so that you will always find yourself doing it.

To protect from liars. To protect from naysayers. To protect from those who would trash a reputation. Protect from those who would bully with their words and with their virtues.

Protect from those who would misuse the power of language or influence in church. Protect. Stand up for somebody.

Notice that somebody is a bit under the cosh from brother such and such or sister such and such. And just get in there and protect.

Always trusts. Always hopes. persevere. And almost incorrigibly positive.

[26 : 29] There are some of us of a disposition that finds that really annoying. But it is not a bad impulse. Always to hope. Because it's right there in 1 Corinthians 13.7.

It's part of what love springs to do. and always perseveres. Doesn't give up on people.

What a wonderful thing love is. A little while ago, about a month or so ago, five weeks ago, we went on a walk.

son Matthew is, even as we speak, just outside Cape Town in South Africa on a mission trip from Hillview where we're members.

And there's a connection with work that goes on in Cape Town and in one of the townships, Massey, on the edge of Cape Town, where poverty is spelt with a capital P. And so Matt's out there, so he had to raise the funds to do this.

[27 : 41] And so we settled as a family to be involved in this with him on a walk. And so he had a Just Giving page and folk kind of contributed to the Massey trip, the South Africa trip through that.

It's a trip that genuinely makes an impact on the lives of the kids in Massey who were taken away for a camp for a week. And it is of astonishing impact to these kids. And it's also very challenging in the growing time and an enjoyable time for the team.

So our walk was originally to do, if you know the Lake District, to do Helvellyn, Scarfell Pike, and Scarfell in a day. And if you know the Lake District, you will know that that's actually quite a lot.

So we missed, by God's providence, most of the thunderstorms that were forecast for that day, first of June, and we switched the order that we were going to do things in so that we might get the best of the day.

And as it turned out, we were, I think, guided in that because we got thunderstormed off the last leg of the walk of Helvellyn. Nonetheless, we managed to do 15.4 miles, and we managed to climb 10,500 feet in 11 hours and 20 minutes.

[29 : 03] I'm not a bit kind of, you know, OCD on that, but those are the stats, and there are more. Of course, if you ascend 10,500 feet, if we'd done Helvellyn, that would have been more than Mont Blanc, actually, but there we are.

We didn't, so I can't boast about that. Anyway, verse 4 tells me not to. So we got back to the car, because when you've done like 10,500 feet of descent, and even though somewhere in your mind you are convinced that you're about 35 years old, your knees and your toes are telling you that you're at least 58, and could be worse.

The bliss, the absolute bliss of being able to take your boots off at the end of that walk, and then just to let them breathe fresh air in a place away from other human beings for health and safety reasons was just great.

It's that sense of never giving up, persevering, keeping going, it's worth it. Then Paul goes on in the third section, 8 through 12, to talk about the endurance of love.

So the things that the Corinthians are really getting worked up about and wanting more and more of, and gauging one another by, and wanting so that they will be gauged highly by others within the fellowship, will fail.

[30 : 43] That is to say they will cease. So the prophecies will cease, and the tongues will cease, the knowledge will cease, it will pass away. Why? Because it is partial. So apparently, in Corinth, they were well known, the city was well known for its production of bronze mirrors.

Hence, we know in part the mirror thing in verse 12. Now this is where Jesus goes from being the underlying geology of this passage to being the outcrop that you can see.

So follow the verses 8 following with me. Love never fails, where there are prophecies they will cease, where there are tongues they will be stilled, where there is knowledge it will pass away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, that when completeness or perfection comes, what is in part disappears.

And then there have been controversies in the church as to exactly when that completeness might arise or arrive. And some people of a cessationist tendency tend to think that, well, that completeness comes when the canon of Scripture is completed.

Show me that in the text, please. No, you can't. Very good. Put that one to one side. And then there are others who say, well, the completeness comes when, as Christians, we are mature.

[32 : 04] Show me that one in real life. And then the third one is that the completeness comes when Jesus appears. And in some circles, that is reduced to simply the eschaton, the end.

You know, the last four things, death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Jesus comes back, the whole thing gets wound up, and it's just the eschaton. And the church, as the bride of Christ, beautifully adorned for her husband, and all that.

But look at what Paul writes. Look at the black bits on the white background. 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 the ways of childhood behind me.

This is a hint, gentlemen. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror. Then we shall see face to face.

And if we still think he's talking in imagery here, in analogies, well, now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

[33 : 11] Well, the eschaton doesn't know you. The maturity of a Christian congregation doesn't know you. The completeness of the canon of Scripture doesn't know you.

A person knows you. A person who will appear. A person who will see us face to face and we will see him face to face.

And it will be the difference between looking at a bronze mirror image of someone and looking face to face with Jesus.

Jesus. And then we will know what love is. God is within us.

And we can know him now. And the Spirit of God is within us. So now we can be like Jesus.

[34 : 20] Now we can love. In part. God. But one day will come when the one word that will describe our perfection, the one word that will describe our completeness is love.

The one word which will describe what it means for us to be like him because we will see him as he is. You know the one John 3?

Is love. We will truly love. Even as we are loved.

But it can start now. So let's pray. Heavenly Father, we acknowledge before you that there are many, many gauges by which we assess our own fellowship and this house that you are building in which you live.

And there are all these gauges by which we assess other fellowships too. and Lord, it is our confession that we tend to put love way down the list of gauges.

[36 : 19] We are more worldlings than we might like to admit. God, we pray that you will forgive us for this and we pray that you will build us up, help us to build one another up to maturity, to bear the likeness of the fullness of God.

We pray that love might increase the feeling and the actions. Lord, I know that I could preach about love till the cows come home and not actually love anyone one iota more.

this is your work within us. We pray that you will do this.

We pray that the truth might live within us. That we might walk in this truth and that we might learn to gauge the love love.

Thank you, Heavenly Father, for those who, in the name of Jesus, have loved us. Thank you mostly for Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us.

[38 : 09] The one who is the loving kindness of God. help us, we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen.