

# 1 Corinthians 13

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 02 October 2005

Preacher: Donald Macleod

[ 0 : 00 ] The Apostle Paul wrote this later because of certain specific problems in the church at Corinth.

It was a young church. It was established by himself, by apostles. It was a church which was living in the context of tremendous expansion and growth.

The church which was hugely gifted and talented. And yet a church with very ordinary problems. There were divisions. There was indiscipline. There was immorality. There was heresy. There was disorder at the Lord's Supper.

Disorder to the church's services. And for the most part, the epistle is focusing upon these very specific and very ordinary problems.

[ 1 : 10 ] But in this glorious chapter, Paul for a moment soars. He leaves the specifics behind him.

All those very mundane problems. And instead, soars up to the universal and the eternal.

That which is true, he might have said, for all of us, always, and everywhere.

The church in Corinth would come and go. As would almost all those New Testament churches.

But this great hymn to love would endure. As love itself would endure. And I want for a moment this morning to try to capture something of Paul's message from this chapter for ourselves at the present time.

[ 2 : 25 ] He reminds us, first of all, that love is the most excellent way. It is the way beyond compare.

It is the supreme way. Now, those Corinthians, they didn't think so. They thought other things mattered far more.

They thought that gifts mattered. They thought that tongue speaking was the important thing. Or prophesying.

Or knowledge. Or some great wonder-working power. They adored those so-called super apostles. Those brilliant charismatic communicators. Those men with all those tremendous gifts. It was gifts.

[ 3 : 27 ] It was gifts. Talent. Ability. Power. That's what mattered to them. Now, Paul doesn't for a moment say that gifts don't matter.

And I don't want you to go away today with any sense of a disparaging on Paul's part of spiritual gifts.

Paul doesn't say for a moment that those gifts aren't important. After all, they are gifts. They are gifts given to us by God.

And because they are gifts, they are important. And let's bear in mind, too, that not only those gifts of tongues, prophesying, miracles, knowledge, martyrdom even.

That not only those come from God. But every good gift comes from God. As James tells us. And this morning in this congregation.

[ 4 : 41 ] What an array of gifts there is. Maybe some here have great insight.

Maybe some have great faith. Maybe some have great teaching skills. But all around us.

And every pew. There are gifts. Young people, especially. On the threshold of life. Incarnations. Of potential. Beyond calculation. You have academic gifts. Scientific gifts.

Artistic gifts. Managerial gifts. Maybe political gifts. Your people skills.

[ 5 : 43 ] Communication skills. All of those. Are divine gifts. And because they are divine.

They are gifts of. Inestimable value. And it's incumbent. On every single one of us. To make the utmost possible use.

Of all of those gifts. And one day God. Will call each one of us to account. For a stewardship. Of our own potential.

And yet Paul is saying. That without love. All those gifts are nothing. He has seen gifts. Exercised. Not squandered. But deployed. And yet not deployed. Under the impulse. [ 6 : 51 ] Or the constraints of love. He has seen men and women covered. Great gifts. That brought them great applause.

That brought them great self-esteem. That brought them power. That brought them. The adoration props.

Of many other human beings. But he said. Without love. Those gifts are nothing. And that's a challenge.

Facing us this morning. Not. To disparage gifts. But he said. Those gifts. In the context. In the context. Of love. So that. We shall use. Every God given up to children. For the good. Other fellow human beings.

[ 7 : 53 ] We shall use them. Caringly. We shall use them. Self-denyingly. We shall use them. Humbly. We shall use them.

Independently. We shall use them. For the glory of God. Let's indeed covet. Heartlessly. The best gifts.

Those gifts. Which will best serve. Our race. And best serve. Our time and place. But let's make sure.

That in deploying. And exercising. Those gifts. We set them always. In the context of love. And then we might ask.

Well what is this love. Of which Paul speaks. And how do you describe. And define it. Well we know that.

[ 8 : 54 ] There's a very special word. For love in this chapter. The word. Agape. Which I suppose. Many of you know. And that.

Points to a love. Which. Is extended. Beyond those. Who are beautiful. Beyond those. Who are friends. Beyond those. Who. Are members. Of our own. Families. Of our own. Communities.

In other words. It's a love. That doesn't depend. Upon. Qualities.

In those. Around us. It's a love. Perhaps. For those. Who are hostile. To us. It's a love.

[ 9 : 53 ] For those. Who are unattractive. It's a love. For those. Who don't belong. To us. And who are not.

Like us. It's a love. That's inclusive. A love. That excludes. None. And that might.

Follow. From the simple. Fact. Of Paul's. Use of the word. Agape. God. But he goes on. From verse 4. Downwards. Down to.

Verse 7. To itemize. For us. Some. Other qualities. Of that love. And that love. As Paul defines it. Has both. Negative. And positive. Attributes. There are some things. There are some things. Which. Love. He says. Is not.

[ 10 : 50 ] For example. In verse 4. Love. Does not envy. What is. Envy. Envy.

Is being distressed. Upset. By the prosperity. Of others. By seeing them.

Excellous. By seeing them. Being better. Than we are. By seeing them. Promoted. By seeing them. Prospering. Envy. Is distraught. At the prosperity. Of others. But love.

Doesn't. Envy. Love. He says. Isn't rude. Or as the authorized version.

[ 11 : 49 ] Put it. Doesn't behave itself. Unseemly. Courtesy. Awareness. Of others.

Around us. Of where they are. Of their circumstances. Of their feelings. Knowing what will upset them.

Knowing what will hurt them. Love has antennae. Social antennae. Always concerned for the impact.

Of our words and actions. Upon other people. In the church. At Corinth. There was this kind of rudeness. In the service.

There were those. Who interrupted. There were those. Who thought that. Their own word. Was so important. That others. Oughting away to them. There were those.

[ 12 : 51 ] Who dressed in a way. Which would have been offensive. To the. Pagans. Around them. There were those. Who came to the Lord's Supper. And didn't wait for the pool.

Those who came there. And misbehaved. In deplorable ways. And Paul is saying. Love. Is courteous.

Love. Always. Aware of others. And of their feelings. Foul sensitivities. Even when we know. Or suspect.

That perhaps they are too sensitive. Yet. Love. Will take account. Of all those. Their sensitivities. Love.

That is not rude. Love is not easily angered. Very powerful word. Paul uses here. To describe.

[13:49] Those. Flashes. Of. Ill temper. Of bad temper. That. Irritability. Which sometimes. Explodes.

To use Paul's word. In paroxysms. Of anger. A wise man. Said once. And I want you to ponder this. Anger.

He said. Is the vice. Of the virtuous. People. Who excuse. Their anger. On the ground.

That they can't suffer. Fools. Gladly. Love. Suffers. Fools. Gladly. Love. This anger.

This anger is born. Of the perception. That others are so much slower than ourselves. And so much less efficient than ourselves.

[14:43] and so we explode because of our own virtue. They're not going as fast as we would go but Paul says no, love is not easily angered.

It does suffer fools gladly. And he says too, love keeps no record of wrongs. You know sometimes memory is such a curse.

There's many a day I wish I could erase so much from that particular disk. And it's so easy for us to keep record of wrongs, to remember some wrong gone by heart, to keep it there so that perhaps one day we will get our revenge or payback.

God keeps no record of wrongs as far as his people are concerned. He has cast our sins into the depths of the sea.

And God doesn't go fishing in those waters. You cast those memories into the depths of your sea.

[16:31] And don't you go fishing in those waters. some of you may know moments of road rage.

Someone does something wrong in your judgment. I'm sure you've heard of the principle Fido.

Forget it. Drive on. Fido. Love keeps no record of wrongs.

Forget. Drive on. Otherwise your own lives will fall prey to bitterness.

Ask God for the grace of amnesia. The grace of forgetfulness. And cast all those wrongs into the depths of the sea.

[17:43] And then those great positives that Paul mentions. Love is patient. patient. Sometimes love is tried.

Sometimes a love for God is tried. When God sends dark providences and when in that darkness he himself seems so far away it's hard when the going is tough and when we know that that going is God's own will it's hard then to keep on loving and yet love endures.

In all our human relationships love will need patience. All those who love us all those who love me I will provoke I will disappoint I will fail I will hurt I will not be there when they need me.

and maybe sometimes for you those you love will try your patience and yet love has it love is patient.

Love is kind it seems such a small thing love it reminds me of Christ who went about doing good love is available love is accessible love is there love sees needs love seeks remedies love is creative seeking ways to bring light into darkness strength into weakness comfort into solitude and hope into desolation and despair love is kind love always protects love always covers it's a very simple

[20:35] Greek word that means love always covers it is the antithesis and the negation of gossip love has heard something to someone's detriment or reproach or the damage of the reputation do you think love can't wait to tell no love covers it love is pained by the news doesn't want to share it doesn't want to divulge it but as they said in my garlic background could for and halva buried deep underground love covers and love he says what it always perseveres it never lets go it doesn't give up it may be disappointed it may be exhausted by the process of loving and loving and loving sometimes the investment appearing to give no return but it perseveres it keeps on going that's the way

God himself is loving kindness the love that will not let me go how many reasons have you and I given to God to give up on us and how many people have we given up on but God never lets go and whether it's love it never lets go and I want to come back to Paul's concern here with the gifts some of you were simply teachers doctors lawyers social workers engineers business women

business men will all those great negatives be true of you and all those great positives in the way you teach in the way you heal in the way that you care will you be free of envy free of discourtesy in your professional lives will you always be patient kind cover all that's detrimental to others reputations and above all will you persevere and then

Paul goes on to another tag and he speaks to us on the permanence of love and he says to us love never fails and he saves us in a way that well all those gifts we have they're for this world those gifts I mentioned at the secular level those academic scientific artistic gifts we have there for here and now for this world but one day they won't be here anymore and even those great spiritual gifts of tongue speaking prophesying and so on the gift of knowledge one day those won't be needed either and in many ways because I'm going to economize on the time here the contrast Paul wants to set up is between love in all its permanence and knowledge in all its impermanence and he's really talking about the way that tongue speaking and prophesying they are about knowledge and when he says that knowledge passes away he's speaking of a particular gift of knowledge that is people who have such a knowledge of the truth that they can teach others and some at Corinth were so proud they thought that they understood all mysteries and all knowledge and Paul is saying to us that one day he says tongue speaking would be needed our prophesying our teachers our preachers our

Bibles we won't lead them and he says look he says at the knowledge that all these things give us and he points out the defects of our current teaching and of our current knowledge and he says it is so partial and so imperfect and God has planned far greater things for us far more profound far more extensive knowledge and far more powerful means of teaching than we currently have because he says here we see through a glass darkly or we see only a reflection in a mirror and Paul's language here is because these ancient people didn't have our mirrors glass backed by mercury which give us such splendid images but they used burnished or polished bronze and Corinth was the world center of mirror manufacture but in that burnished or polished bronze you saw only a very poor image it wasn't clear it wasn't focused it was fudgy and it wasn't precise and he's saying well thank God for our current knowledge but yet we've only seen a pale reflection of the glory of God and the magnificence of Jesus in our current dispensation we're seeing only through a glass darkly and he's saying to us even our knowledge is so childish because God has had to speak baby talk to us because we're only spiritual children in this world on the side of glory and so God has to speak baby talk to us so those two great pictures

[ 28 : 24 ] Paul gives that we're seeing only large image on the polished bronze or God speaking baby talk to a different kind of knowledge that knowledge will pass away a day will come where we won't need tongue speaking or prophesying we won't need teachers or preachers because one day we will see face to face we will see Christ not in some reflection but we'll see Christ as he is in the glory of his transfigured humanity in the magnificence of his resurrection body we shall feel see have access to the greatness of a soul we shall see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ not some poor mirror image not some image through smoking glass smoked glass but as he is all the liliaments of the person of

Jesus all the glory of God in his face we shall see him face to face so we won't need teachers preachers prophesies none of these they will pass away that knowledge will pass away indeed all our knowledge passes away how ephemeral it's the most up to date research the next few years you'll have state of the art this and state of the art that latest journal articles you'll feel you're so up to date James Simpson's nephew followed him as professor of the late 19th century and shortly after his induction to the chair the librarian asked him to indicate what books he wanted removed from the shelves of the library in his department and

Simpson said to him just remove all those which are more than ten years old knowledge had passed away so ephemeral but love is permanent love is permanent we will not have Bibles in glory or pulpits in glory or Lord's days in glory or Lord's suppers in glory or preachers or teachers but love never fails that we shall take with us and then Paul says at last this love is the greatest faith hope and love more durable than all gifts yes there will be faith in heaven trust in

God and his Christ and there will be hope because in heaven there is an infinite future full of promise 10,000 years and still 10,000 years more to go faith and hope will endure but love is greater greater not only than gifts greater than faith greater even than hope and why so because love is for others it's outgoing it's not introspective or inward looking or self seeking love is what

God is love love is the shape of Christ who for others made himself nothing love is the form of God who gave even his own son for the world salvation love is the greatest thing in world in closing I want to make two points I want first of all to give you a test love I wonder as we listen to this kind of exposition of love do we feel oh many folk in the church needed that and do we say to ourselves if only so and so and such and such and such and such if only they would live like that what a different church what a different world that's the test and if we are saying that we have failed it because the magnificence of this passage is this there's only one person and one party in the whole world whom this chapter is rebuking and that's myself we mustn't hear it for anybody else it's only for ourselves and my second and last point is this if love is the greatest thing in the world then you and

[ 35 : 37 ] I must want it more than we want anything else in the world not to be loved but to love we stand many of us this morning on the threshold of achievement what are our ambitions you have your lawful ambitions you may dream of first class honors you may dream of prizes of positions of promotions you may dream of being free from financial worries you may dream of houses and fields and cars and ponies we may dream we may want we may wish we may long for and

I can tell you there are some here this morning and God will be so good to you that you will know under his hand a prosperity an eminence even that you could never today dream of God will raise some of you very very high but maybe not unless we make a dirty aim to be loving because without that love all our talents our skills our gifts our powers they are nothing love is the greatest thing in the world you go and want it and seek it more than anything else in the world may

God bless to us this world let's again join in prayer oh lord we ask you in grace to look down upon us and we ask you to illuminate your word for us so that we may see it's we may feel its force see its teaching with clarity be drawn by the wonder of its provisions and its promises and may we above all lord be drawn today by the knowledge of your own love for us enfleshed in christ to reciprocate that love towards you and to emulate your love towards our neighbors keep us keep us lord and again keep us in all the days and years to come may no life here make ship break may all be kept in our saviors name amen