

1 Corinthians 13 sermon Tregear 12.9.2021 – Love like God

In the very last book of the Bible, in Revelation chapter 2 John, the same John who wrote the Gospel and the letter we have been looking at, gives a message to the church at Ephesus. The church is praised for a number of things; its works, its labour, its steadfastness, its refusal to tolerate evil men, its testing of false apostles, its endurance on account of Christ's name without growing weary; and lastly their opposition or hatred to the wrong works of the Nicolaitans. What a splendid list of qualities! They're doing a great job in following Jesus. But, But, John says there is just one thing that you are not doing. There is just one sin they've committed. What is it? They have forsaken or given up their first love. The love they had for God and for others at the beginning is no longer there. And John warns, Repent, come back, restore that love that you had when you first became believers, otherwise I will remove your lampstand. One thing, LOVE.

Our Bible reading today gives a similar message doesn't it. If I speak with beautiful words, or powerful words, if I can make mountains move, if I give up everything, even get burned at the stake as a martyr but I do not have love I am nothing. Same message isn't it?

PRAY

Our passage last week was about love, God's love and how we, as God's children, are to love others. Just to recap we learnt that God is Love – at the very core of his being, at his very essence God is love. We know what love is because Jesus showed it to us by dying for us. The cross is the great example of god's love. And so what word do you use to describe this love of God? The early Christians took a little used Greek word for love, *agape*, and gave it a whole new meaning. The Greeks had 4 main words for love, to describe family love, brotherly love, romantic love and charity. In the New Testament the Christians almost exclusively used the fourth word for love and they gave it a new understanding. We know what this love is like because God has shown us this love in coming into the world and dying for us humans who

were opposed to him – he died for his enemies. 1 John 4:10 – This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us, and sent his Son to die for us. This is a love that comes from God. Our love is so often a love which is given only to people who are loving to us, or attractive to us. We love to meet our needs for longing and belonging. With God there are no such needs to be filled, but just a love that desires to give.

C.S. Lewis has some wise words to say on this:

1. In God there is no hunger that needs to be filled, **only plenteousness that desires to give.**

2. God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures (that means we are not needed – he doesn't need us) in order that **He may love and perfect them.**

3. He uses a rather gross biological image - God, is a 'host' who deliberately creates His own parasites (that's us); causes us to be **that we may exploit and "take advantage of "Him.**

Herein is love.

Bottom line is this: In the other three loves, which Lewis calls natural loves we love things or people who we are naturally drawn to. With agape love or Divine love – God is able to put in us the same love he has, a love which simply desires what is best for the other person. And this love that God gives us (Lewis calls it Divine-Gift love) enables us to love those who naturally we would find unlovable. And finally God enables us to have a love towards himself. Not that he needs love, and there is no sense in which we can give to God anything which is not already his.

And so we come to 1 Corinthians chapter 13 with that background.

It's important to think about the context of this chapter – I know that it's used often at weddings, but it's not a wedding passage but an everyday, church living passage. In chapter 12 Paul is talking about spiritual gifts, how the Spirit has given us each spiritual gifts to encourage

each other, to be used for each other in the church; and that leads on to the next part where Paul tells us that we are all part of Christ's body. We are all different parts but we are part of one body. So in v.27 he says, "*Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*" We're each given different gifts, not for ourselves, but for the body, so we can each have a part in building up each other. And then as a lead in to chapter 13 Paul says *I will show you the most excellent way* – which is to love each other. Then in chapter 14 Paul talks about how they are to use the gifts of prophecy and tongues as they meet together and then how they are to conduct their meeting times together. So this chapter on love is in the middle of teaching about how we are to operate as a church; how we are to live life together as a church. And love quite rightly is at the centre of all that we do. And what a passage Paul gives us – so many sides of love for us to consider as we live our lives with each other.

The first section from v.1-3 is a series of hypothetical situations. Basically Paul is saying anything I do, if I don't have love as I'm doing it, it's worth nothing. These verses draw attention to things that people admire. The tongues speaking probably refers to speaking in tongues, something that the Corinthian Christians prided themselves on, but it could also refer to the general human eloquence – Greeks loved a good speech. But these things, and Paul includes the tongues of angels, are nothing without love. If I have all sorts of knowledge; again Greeks were impressed with wisdom; or if I have the gift of prophecy. Mysteries here refers not to puzzles but things that are unknown on earth, only in the heavens. So Paul says all knowledge whether it's from earth or heaven, without love it's worth nothing. And so it goes on – faith to move mountains, even amazing generosity. These things are not wrong but if they are done out of pride or for some other selfish reason, and not love, they are worth nothing. And then to finish off Paul says someone can be so devoted to serving God that they will even surrender themselves to painful death, but if there is no love, if it is done out of pride for example, and not love, it's worthless. As The Message finishes this section – "So no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love."

Section 2 Paul now turns to describe the characteristics of true love. What should this love look like? There are 15 qualities here. Firstly, it is patient, or never gives up – it puts up with a lot, it is the opposite of short-tempered, to invent a new word, it's "long-tempered".

Love is kind, actively interested in the welfare of those around them.

Love does not envy – it's not displeased when others do well, are successful. When we struggle to reach a goal but see others reach it, sometimes with relative ease, it's easy to feel envy, but love does not envy.

It's so easy to boast or just casually mention our achievements, but love does not boast. This is agape love which gives, whereas pride wants to assert itself. But love doesn't have a swelled head.

v.5, Love does not dishonour others; this is not an easy word to translate; NIV says, "dishonour"; others say "rude", or "ill-mannered". The Message says "doesn't force itself on others". Basically, what Paul is saying is there are many ways of behaving badly, and love avoids them all.

Then love is not self-seeking or "me first". Love is concerned with the well-being of others, not with its own welfare.

The next one, "love is not easily angered" or as Phillips translates it, "Love is not touchy". It's not easily provoked. It is easy to be so concerned with getting our own way that we become irritated with people, well-meaning and otherwise, who frustrate our best intentions. But the person infused with God's love takes such frustration in stride, accepting it as part of life, as part of what God has given them.

The next one is pretty clear, "Love keeps no score of wrongs". Ooh that's hard isn't it. To not hold anything against anyone. Love does not nurture grudges.

Next, love is not happy when things go badly for others. Another one we have trouble putting in to practice. I don't like the Melbourne Storm footy team. I won't go into the reasons why. But I find myself inwardly rejoicing if they get a penalty or something bad happens to the team. I know this might sound petty and it is, but it indicates a reaction within me that delights in the misfortune of others who I don't like. Paul says this is not love.

Love also is happy when truth wins out. It is the progress of truth, not the misfortunes of others that makes love rejoice. As I think about this quality, and indeed of all these qualities, I'm reminded so much of Jesus. This is how Jesus acted – no me first, not dishonouring others, no envy, only kindness and patience. Here, truth, real truth, is found in Jesus. Jesus spoke of himself as “the truth” (John 14:6) and when John talked about Jesus coming into the world in the first chapter of his gospel he said truth and grace came through Jesus Christ.

And then four more qualities as this section finishes. Love protects – it covers up what might not be right in someone else, it protects. It doesn't want to drag out in the open what will be laid bare for others to gloat over – it protects. It always trusts – it doesn't mean that it is gullible, but it is always eager to believe the best about others. Love is clear-sighted and is able to recognise wrong as easily as the shrewdest evaluator of human nature, but love will always give the benefit of the doubt.

Then there is that phrase, “love always hopes”. Love is optimistic. The world looks for the downfall of people and assumes that they cannot survive trials. Love takes the opposite view, it always looks for something better. Maybe Paul, in his context of persecution, is looking past the trials and difficulties of his time to the final triumph when Jesus returns. Certainly Christians face difficulties that, humanly speaking, seem hopeless. But love never regards such trials as insurmountable, as crushing. Love does not lash out in wild rebellion against life's difficulties – love always hopes. Love knows that God will ultimately triumph through these trials.

Finally, love perseveres, keeps going to the end, endures all things. This is not a passive thing but an active engagement, like a soldier who continues to fight not giving up. Love's endurance is a positive acceptance of life with all its difficulties, not a passive giving in to things as they are. Love, in fact, does more than put up with life's hardship; it grows and develops as it struggles against them. Love sees problems positively – as valuable tests that refine it and prove its worth. This last quality also reminds me of the first one in this section about patience and how we are to respond to others. We not only forgive others but we show that person that we still believe in them and are ready to stand by them – we persevere with them. Even after repeated disappointments we don't give up on others, for this is how our heavenly Father acts towards us.

These verses are very proactive, not passive. Love is something we actively engage in, not something that just happens. Also it's easy to beat ourselves up and lament how far short we fall. I want to encourage you to see these as qualities that God is wanting to grow in our lives.

So we're going to stop for a couple of minutes. Look at v.4-7 on your own, you could use one or both of the versions that are on the Bulletin – what is one description that stands out to you? How are you going with this? Take a few moments and think about how you are going with this with someone you are living with or maybe interacting with by phone. What is God saying to you about this relationship? It would be good to write something down too.

Ok. To finish off this wonderful chapter. The last section I would summarise as saying everything is going to pass away but love will never pass away.

Paul's point is that big changes await us when we depart this life. Things like prophecy, speaking in tongues, and the earthly knowledge that we value so highly will then have no relevance. Just as the things of childhood become less meaningful as we grow older, so these earthly achievements will find no place in heaven. But love is different, it will remain. We can know here and now the love that God's love kindles in our hearts, a love that we will still know in heaven. We are loved by God now, and we will be loved by God then. Love surpasses all those other qualities that we right now think are so important.

So Paul's conclusion in v.13 he lists faith, hope and love together as remaining forever. All three are important, each in their own way. But love is pre-eminent. He is saying to the Corinthians that the things that they value most – such as prophecy and knowledge and speaking in tongues – are not the things that matter most. More important are the great qualities of faith, hope and love. And, he is saying, there is nothing greater than love. And who has shown us what love is. Jesus has shown us by his death on the cross.