Love
1 Corinthians 13

We're looking at Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. And while there were some churches that Paul could describe as exemplary for others, Corinth wasn't one of them. Because here was a church with divisions and problems with pride, and people evaluating each other by external stuff like image and spin, and there was sexual immorality, and people insisting on their freedoms even if it trampled on others, alongside a disregard for the poor. And if all that wasn't enough, in chapters 12 and 14 Paul is dealing with the self-absorption of their faith: that they're using spiritual gifts to draw attention to themselves.

So, chapter 13 that we're looking at today wasn't originally written for young, hopelessly in love couples, to have read at their wedding! It's sandwiched between these two chapters where Paul is tackling the Corinthians attitude to their God given gifts and abilities, and how they're using them to compare themselves to each other.

But in talking about love, Paul isn't just addressing this issue of gifts, love also has something to say about all the other issues they're facing as well.

And that's why we need to hear this chapter as much as they did. Because everything they faced, we face: our societies - even some churches - are increasing divided, and proud, and people are evaluated based on image and spin, and people insist on their freedoms even if that negatively impacts others and people can say they're people of faith but often that seems to be very self-focused.

And there lies a problem. Because if love has something to say to these issues, we're arguably living at a time when we're more confused than ever as to what love is. The Beetles sang 'All you need is Love.' But what is love? Look at Hollywood and love seems to equal sexual desire or chemistry. Look at the public square and love equals tolerance. In fact, not just tolerance but celebrating someone else's lifestyle choices, and not to do that is said to be unloving, or even worse, if you express it, hate speech. But is that what love is?

Well, Paul gets to all that, but he starts further back.

The Measure of a Life
How *do* you measure someone's life? How do you measure the value that someone brings to the table? Well, in Corinth, they were valuing themselves, and each other, based on the presence or absence of certain gifts, like speaking in tongues. And if you had this gift, your stock rose, and if you didn't, it fell.

But think how the same thing happens today, and not just in churches. We tend to evaluate people based on their giftedness. The actor, the pop-star, the academic, the entrepreneur - the more gifted they are, the more successful they are, the more stand-out they are - the higher we esteem them. And alongside that, character has come to mean less. In the realm of politics we're told that someone's private life doesn't impact their ability to perform their duties. And so what we're doing is ranking gift - or to use the Bible word for gifts - *charismata* - charisma - above character.

And Paul says, ‘yes, and giftedness is the wrong yardstick, the wrong measure, to use’. Verse 1: ‘If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, *but have not love*, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.’

Now, are there any noises that really get on your nerves? My watch died recently, so I’m using one of my girls’ cast offs. The problem is, it was cast off for a reason - it ticks loudly and it drives Su mad. For me, I can’t bear the sound someone else eating an apple. Or, as a family, we all complain if someone drops a baking tray in the kitchen and everyone goes, ‘grrr, I hate Loud Kitchen Noises.’ And Paul is saying, you can speak in tongues as much as you like, but if you’re devoid of love - you’re no better than a noise that gets your attention but does nothing else.

In fact, the word he uses there for ‘noisy gong’ was the word for a kind of first century metallic sound amplifier. A sort-of first century megaphone. In other words, you can be incredibly gifted, and everyone else recognise that, but if you’re using that gift, or living your life, without love for others, you’re just like a megaphone, drawing attention to yourself: ‘Hello! Look at me! Look how gifted I am! Life’s about me!’

Now, hopefully you think you’d never do that. But look at v2: ‘And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.’ So what Paul’s saying isn’t just true for the spectacular. You can be very insightful, or spiritually sensitive - and people recognise that about you; or you can be highly knowledgeable, and always have the answer; or academically brilliant - top of your class, Nobel prize material; you can even be strong in faith and everyone look up to you or your family as spiritually having it together, and Paul says, if you have all that *without love*, the bank account of your life isn’t full, it’s empty. In the spreadsheet of heaven, the angels don’t look down your column and go, ‘ooh, isn’t she talented’, they go, ‘bankrupt; nothing there’.

You can even live a highly sacrificial life and it count for nothing: v3: ‘If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.’ Now, if someone literally gave away everything saying they were doing it for God, or for the poor, they’d earn some kudos, wouldn’t they? Or if someone was martyred for the faith, they’d become a hero. And yet, Paul is saying, you can do these things and there be no love for God, or others, in those actions, because in reality you can be doing them for yourself: To be seen, to be applauded, or even to gain reward in heaven.

So, to use a crude analogy, God’s measuring stick is not marked with centimetres of talent, or success, of giftedness, not even of sacrifice, but with centimetres of love. In his kingdom, it’s always character over charisma.

But that begs a question - what is love?

The Nature of Love

And Paul doesn’t give us an exhaustive description. What he does do is paint a picture in v4-7 of what love is in action and attitude, and then he tells us what it isn’t, before going back to what it is.

Verse 4, ‘Love is patient and kind.’ If you asked my girls, they’d tell you I need to grow in patience. And Paul would agree wouldn’t he. Not because he knows me, but because he knows we all need to grow in patience. Because while there’s a right desire that the precious resource of time isn’t

wasted, there's also a wrong impatience that says my time is more important than your time; that I take priority over you. And Paul says, in contrast, love is patient.

Now, there's a cliché that says, 'true love waits'. Except true love *does* wait. Lust doesn't. Lust wants it now, it's impatient. And that willingness to use others to get ahead, to get what you want, doesn't wait. It's in a hurry - for advancement, or success. And a superior attitude to those less able or less gifted than you, doesn't wait. It wants them out of your hair as soon as possible. But love waits. It's patient. It's willing to have its precious resource of time taken up by the one it loves.

And it's kind. Now 'kind' can sound weak and limp, can't it? Someone gives you something that you don't really like and you say, 'that was very *kind* of you.' But listen to what Paul writes to Titus: 'When the goodness *and loving kindness* of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us' (Titus 3:4-5) So the kindness of God doesn't look weak or limp, it looks like the Son of God giving his life for us who are unworthy of it. So, if love is kind like God is kind, then love means going to the bottom to lift others up. It means expending yourself to see others flourish. It means risking your comfort, your life, to see others come into all that God has for them.

But then Paul tells us what love isn't. Because when you're defining something, sometimes you need to spell out what you don't mean.

Verses 4-5, 'Love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful.' Now, back in chapter 8, Paul took aim at their overinflated view of themselves and said there's a kind of '"knowledge" [that] puffs up, but love builds up.' (8:1) And here, he's saying it again. Love does not draw attention to itself. It doesn't elbow its way in, whether in church with, 'you're not letting me use my gifts' or in conversation, 'I demand to be heard'.

Instead, Paul says, 'love does not insist on its own way.' Now, certain people in Corinth *were* insisting on their own way. But that's not a problem reserved for Corinth, is it. Think how today we can mistake self-gratification - getting what I want - for love. And we 'love' this person because they tell me what I want to hear, or fulfil my needs. And we score their love on giving me what I want.

And Paul is saying, true love is not narcissistic, it never has itself as its focus.

But if love doesn't insist on its own way, neither is it 'resentful'. It doesn't keep a count of wrongs. Now, you can. And in marriage some couples do, and when they do it's terrible. And one partner does something wrong, and out comes the list. And ghosts from the past can stalk a marriage because they're never laid to rest. But love doesn't keep score, Paul says.

But moralism does, doesn't it. Whether secular or religious. Because moralism tells you, you should forgive this other person because you're better than to hold a grudge, you're better than that, because you're better than them. But that just leaves you proud. Plus, you don't really forgive, you log it away, knowing you've got something on them if ever you need it in the future.

So if we're to genuinely forgive, and not keep score, we need something that will humble us. We need something that tells us we too have sinned, that we too need forgiveness, but that those sins are not held against *us,* that we *have* been forgiven. But as well as being humbled, we need something

that will give us a security that means we don't have to hold things against others so we can use it against them in the future.

And in Colossians 3:13 Paul says, 'forgive each other, as the Lord has forgiven you.' And imagine the list of all the wrong things you've thought and said and done, and all the good you haven't, that God could keep against you - growing longer by the day. But at the cross, Jesus stepped in and he was judged in your place. And he took the blame. And your list was and is wiped clean. And that humbles you because you know you don't deserve it. But it also gives you deep security, because you know your heavenly Father loves you, so you don't need to hold ammunition against others.

The problem is, you could hear all this, that love is kind, and doesn't insist on its own way, and doesn't count up wrong and think, 'so love lets anything go.' Which is how our current culture thinks of love - that it's not loving to tell someone they're wrong.

But look what Paul says in verse 6: 'Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.' So true love does take sides - against wrongdoing and for the truth. It's not a non-judgmental tolerance of all things. Love does make judgments. And any parent knows that's right. I mean, you might find a parent somewhere who says, 'well, we need to let little Johnny find out for himself what's right and wrong.' But push them and no parent would rejoice when their child's life was being destroyed by drugs or drug-pushers. No parent would rejoice at a life spiralling down into crime. No one would wish that for their child. Why? Because they love them. Because love always wants the best for the one it loves. So instinctively you know love judges between good and bad.

BB Warfield, the great Princeton theologian of the 19th Century wrote: 'He who loves men must needs hate with a burning hatred all that does wrong to human beings'. And he was talking about Jesus - and how Jesus was angry at death, and hypocrites, and corrupt rulers and satan. Why? Because if you genuinely love people, like Jesus did, you're going to hate what harms them. You're going to come to moral judgments about things. You're going to oppose some things. You're going to say of some things, 'no, that's bad.'

So love is not just being nice and non-confrontational! Love is not being English. Love doesn't rejoice at wrongdoing because it sees the roots and the fruit of wrongdoing - it knows where it comes from and what it leads to, and love can never rejoice in that.

But, that begs another question doesn't it? How do you decide what's harmful, what's wrong? How do you decide whether this is something you should rejoice in or, as current culture has it, *celebrate*, or oppose?

Well, to answer that, you've got to know what the point of life is, don't you? Whether something is harmful depends entirely on whether it helps you achieve your goal, your end in life. What you're here for. And, of course, atheism and secularism can never help you answer that question. Because, if they're honest, they'll tell you there is no ultimate point to your life.

But the Bible tells you, 'no, your life matters, you're here for a reason, your life does have a goal to live for.'

The End of Life

Look at v10, 'when *the perfect* comes'. And the word Paul uses for *perfect* comes from the word *telos*. It's you attaining what you were made for, the goal of life, your *raison d'être.*

But what is that? Well, before Paul tells us he says that between now and then all these spiritual gifts the Corinthians are measuring themselves and others with, will pass away. Verse 8: ‘Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.’ So these gifts you’re making so much of are transient, but love isn’t. They end, but love doesn’t.

Verse 9, ‘For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.’ Gifts of tongues, and prophecy and words of knowledge, they’re the partial - they’re not the full. They’re given to help us reach the goal, they’re not the goal itself. And to drive that home Paul uses two pictures. And the first is of a child growing up. Verse 11, ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.’

So this present life is like being a child compared to what’s to come. And in this our childhood, God gives us these spiritual gifts. But the whole point of childhood is, you don’t stay there. You grow up. You achieve maturity. You become an adult.

So, Paul gives a second picture: Verse 12, ‘For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.’ And in Paul’s day, you didn’t have mirrors like now. You had a piece of highly polished metal. And if you looked into it you saw, but you didn’t quite see. Was it your reflection? Yes… but.

And that is what this age is like. You see, but not perfectly. You know God, but there’s so much more to know. You experience him, but there’s an infinite well still to tap. You enjoy him, and yet his delights are endless and you’ve only just begun.

It’s in the age to come when we will see face to face. And that’s what the perfect is. That’s what the end, the goal of your life is - that’s what everything in your life is pointing to and preparing you for. That’s what decides whether something is right or wrong, good or bad, helpful or harmful. That one day, the day you die, you’ll see God face to face.

Because in the Bible, that’s what face to face means - it means to meet with, to encounter God. Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord and said, ‘I have seen God face to face’. Gideon saw the angel of the Lord and cried out, ‘I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face.’ It was said of Moses that God spoke with him as a man speaks with a friend, face to face.

And so to know God face to face is to experience him for all eternity and to find him infinitely loving and lovely. That we will love God and enjoy him forever. That’s what you’ve been made for. That’s what it means to be human. That’s why Jesus so loved us and gave himself for us. That’s why love will never put itself first, but always seek to encourage others on the way to that face to face encounter. And it’s why will not rejoice in anything that robs you of that, or puts that in peril.

Verse 13, ‘So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.’ We’ll spend eternity trusting - putting our faith in God’s infinite goodness. We’ll spend eternity in hope, knowing there is no end nor limit to his goodness. But above all these we’ll spend eternity marvelling at the Lord Jesus, who would give up everything to rescue people like us, because he loves us.

Let his love so change our hearts that we are people who love with humility and with courage.