

Love

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 1st May 2005

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, 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. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 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 childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13: 1-13)

Introduction

This passage is one of the most famous passages in the Bible. It is a favourite reading at weddings. But it is not in fact a sentimental poem about warm feelings you have when you are "in love". It is actually a rebuke to a church which had gone badly astray in its views about spiritual gifts. Instead of realising that spiritual gifts had been given to enable the believer to build up other believers, some members of the church thought of spiritual gifts as things to be proud about and to use as the basis for a sort of spiritual one-upmanship. There will no doubt have been many red faces in the congregation as this letter was

first red out, and the sinful folly of some members of the church was exposed by the apostle.

The passage is a challenge and a rebuke to us as well, because we too tend to take pride in our gifting, whether natural gifting or spiritual gifting. We too tend to be unloving in the way we relate with each other, and with our families and neighbours.

The passage divides naturally into three sections:

1. Love is essential, vv. 1 – 3.
2. Love is genuinely concerned with the good of others, vv. 4 – 7.
3. Love is eternal, vv. 8 – 13.

1. Love is essential

In verses 1 to 3 the apostle says that love is so important that without it even the most amazing gifting, and the most startling acts of service, are of no use and achieve nothing.

1) The gift of tongues without love is useless

Paul says in verse 1, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." You might have the most amazing gift of speaking other human languages by the power of the Holy Spirit, or even of being able to speak in the language of angels, but without love it is just some harsh discordant noise. You might be a great linguist, and be fluent in many languages; you might have the "gift of the gab" and be able to tell all sorts of interesting stories; you might be the "life and soul of the party" at social gatherings; but without love all such gifts of speech are useless.

2) Other spiritual gifts, without love, give us nothing

In verse 2 the apostle mentions two other gifts, prophecy and faith, but says if he has these gifts without love he is nothing. "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." He might have a very strong gift of prophecy, one which understands *all* mysteries, and *all* knowledge, but without

love he is nothing. He might have a very powerful gift of faith, even a faith which is able to move mountains, but if he has not love, again he is nothing.

If you do not love, you do not have the Holy Spirit. And if you do not have the Holy Spirit, you are not a Christian. And if you are not a Christian you are on your way to Hell. Jesus warned us that there will be those who have exercised most amazing miraculous gifts – prophecy, driving out evil spirits and other miracles – who will be told on the last day by him "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7.23). Spiritual gifts in themselves are no evidence of spiritual maturity. They are not even evidence of conversion to Christ.

So do not be over-impressed by spiritual gifts, either in yourself or in others. You might be a great preacher, a great theologian; you might very well read and as sound as a bell doctrinally; you might be able to sniff out false teaching a mile away; you might have a top degree from university; you might be very successful at work; you might be a brilliantly well-organised home-maker; you might be any one of these things, but if you do not have love, you are a nobody as far as God is concerned.

3) Spectacular acts of service without love achieve nothing

Paul says in verse 3, "If I give all I possess to the poor, and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." It is possible to be apparently very generous, without having real love. It is possible to be very zealous for God, and to be prepared to die a martyr's death without having love. If we do these things without love, we achieve nothing.

Perhaps you have made great financial sacrifices for God; perhaps you have visited every home in the area in door-to-door visiting; perhaps you have done countless Bible studies with individuals; perhaps you have stirred up opposition from other religious groups by bold open-air preaching; you may have done all of these things and more besides, but if you do not have love you have gained nothing.

Let me ask you this, as I ask myself, are your priorities wrong? Does the cultivation of love have the priority that it should in your life? Perhaps you are the sort of person who is busy, busy, busy. At the beginning of the day you write yourself a list of things to be done that day. Then you spend the rest of the day trying to get as far down your list as you can. As the day goes on, and it

becomes more and more clear that you are not going to get very far down that list, you become more and more uptight, and more and more unpleasant to all those people around you. If that is the case then your priorities are wrong. You have lost sight of the thing that is more important than anything else: that you love those around you.

Or, on the other hand, maybe your approach to life is pleasure, pleasure, pleasure. You are not worried about getting jobs done. All you are interested in is having fun. Your idea of the perfect day is that you lie in bed until about 2 O'clock in the afternoon, then you get up, get some food, then watch a bit of TV, then you have some more food, then you go off to the cinema, then you stay up late drinking and playing cards with your friends, and finally get into bed at about 4 in the morning. If so, you also have completely missed the point, just as much or more so than the person who is really tense about getting jobs done. The whole idea of life is not pleasure but love.

So this section tells us that if we focus on anything else other than love we have completely missed what life is all about. The goal of life, according to the Bible, is love. This is the whole point and purpose of our existence: to love God and to love others. If we are not in the business of love we have not even started to live. We are completely off track. You could get everything you want; you could become a millionaire; you could have a wonderful house to live and a beautiful wife, but if you do not have love what have you gained? Nothing.

2. Love is genuinely concerned for others

Verses 4 to 7 form the core of this passage in that they give a description of love. The way Paul does this is by personifying love. He says love has this characteristic and that characteristic. By so doing he gives us an "identikit" of a loving person. Each of the characteristics of love is a yardstick by which we can measure our lives. We can and should ask ourselves about each one, "Is this me? Is this what I am like?"

1) Love is patient

First of all we read that "love is patient". What that literally means is love suffers for a long time. In other words, love has got a long fuse. If you are loving then you will put up with insults, taunts, aggravation, annoying behaviour without being unpleasant back. If you do make a response at all it will be a kind, quiet

and measured response which points out how the other person has behaved in an unloving way, without being unloving yourself in the way that you speak.

2) Love is kind

Next, the apostle says that "love is kind". Kindness is responding sympathetically to the needs of others, even the needs of those who are not deserving of that response. This is how God is. God is kind to people, and sends his sunshine upon the just and the unjust, and he sends rain upon those who deserve it and those who do not deserve it. He does say not say, "I'll send a bit of rain for this person because he is a good person, but I won't send any rain for that person because that is a bad person." No, he shows his kindness to all. He has good will towards all, and this good will is expressed in tangible ways. Jesus said we should be like our heavenly Father and show kindness to all (Matthew 6.43 – 48).

3) Love does not envy

The next thing the apostle says is that "love does not envy". Envy is when you feel miserable because somebody else has been blessed. If you have love in your heart you are going to want the best for somebody else. You are going to want them to be blessed. And if they are blessed in a certain way you will be genuinely happy for them, whether or not you have been blessed in the same way yourself.

4) Love does not boast

The next phrase is "love does not boast". If you are loving you are not going to blow your own trumpet. You are not going to brag about your own successes or advertise your talents and your abilities and your triumphs. Why? Because you will think to yourself, "I don't want to make this other person feel miserable, to feel he is not doing very well. In case he might feel a bit down if I talk about my achievements, I'll keep quiet about my successes. The only boasting on my lips will be 'boasting' about God and about his goodness to a wretched terrible sinner like me."

5) Love is not proud

Then Paul says that love "is not proud". The literal translation for this is that it is

not "puffed up." Paul has spoken earlier on in the letter about those who have an over-inflated ego which has been puffed up like a balloon. Such a person has been puffed up. He has got a big head that is all puffed up, but there is nothing inside it except hot air. There is no substance to this sense of self-importance that he has.

If you are truly loving you will not be puffed up. You will rather say about yourself, like the apostle Paul, that you are "the worst of sinners" (1 Timothy 1.15). You will echo his words where he says, "I am less than the least of all God's people." (Ephesians 3.8)

Why can a loving person not be proud? Because when you are proud or puffed up you treat other people with contempt. You despise them in your heart, and this attitude will betray itself in your manner and in your speaking. You treat people as if they are scum, as if they are not worth your time. But if you have a humble attitude then even the person that the world would consider to be an absolute nobody you would talk to, and be interested in. You would regard that person as more important than you. And if you are humble you will be open to criticism from others. You will be teachable. Your attitude will be that you can learn something from everyone, even the person whom the world would despise and consider to be of not importance. So humility is an essential element of love.

6) Love is not rude

Paul goes on to say "Love is not rude". What this means literally is that "love is not unbecoming". It does not act in a way which is inappropriate.

If you have love you will be well mannered. You will use words like "please" and "thank you". You will open the door for other people. You will not invade people's body space. You will not push into people. You will not go to barge your way into certain situations. You will not interrupt. You will call people by name, rather than saying "Oy!" or "You!".

If you have love you will use words like "idiot", "fool", "liar" and other such terms only very sparingly and after careful consideration, when you are persuaded beyond doubt that what you are saying is both accurate and needs to be said for the good of the person to whom you are saying it. Jesus did use the words "hypocrites", "fools", "blind guides" and "evil snakes" but he did so only when

love dictated that he should tell the Pharisees quite frankly the condition that they were in, and love also dictated that he should warn others about the danger of the Pharisees. In our lack of love we so often use these words as terms of abuse in completely inappropriate circumstances.

7) Love is not self-seeking

Paul goes on, "Love is not self-seeking". What this means is that if you are loving you will give thought to the needs and concerns of others, and not just your own needs. Where there is a clash between the two you will put the needs of others before your own.

This does not mean to say that we should neglect ourselves. It is actually not very loving not to eat properly, not to wash properly, and not to get enough sleep, because it makes you rather an unpleasant person to have around, and not a very useful person to other people. It is loving to look after your own self, to look after your own body and to make sure that your needs are met as far as that is possible.

But we should also have an eye out for the needs of others. As Paul says in Philippians 2.4, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others". Our great example in this is Jesus Christ himself. He was in heaven. He was totally happy, totally secure. He had everything he needed. He did not have to leave heaven at all. He could have stayed in heaven for all of eternity, satisfied completely with the love of the Father and the love of the Holy Spirit. But as he was in heaven he saw those created in need. He took pity on them. He did not think about himself and his own interests and his own comfort, but he left the comfort of heaven, became a man, humbled himself, lived as a servant and then died on the cross. Why? Because he was thinking about others rather than himself. He did not seek his own wellbeing but he sought the wellbeing of others. That is the great pattern for our lives.

8) Love is not easily angered

Paul continues, "Love is not easily angered". What that means literally is that love is not provoked. If you are a loving person then, even when bad things are done to you, you are not going to respond with anger on your own account.

This is one great difference between what is sometimes called "righteous anger"

and "unrighteous anger". Of course there is a place for anger, but the correct place for anger is for where the name of God is being dishonoured, and where others are being hurt. Jesus expressed anger as the house of God was being dishonoured and people were being exploited by the money changes in the temple. But we do not see Jesus ever angry on his own account. As He was suffering, mocked, whipped, scourged, and strung up on the cross he answered kindly, and prayed for his tormentors. Yet what we tend to do is the exact opposite. We tend not to really care about other people's injustices, but if anyone touches us people soon hear about it. That is the sort of people we are. We are so self-preoccupied, so self-absorbed.

But this phrase says that love is not easily angered, it is not easily provoked. The reason that if you are loving you are not thinking so much "How do I feel about what has been done to me?" but "How would I feel if I was in that person's shoes, and I was at the sharp end of my tongue? What would I feel if I was the butt of that sort of anger?" And so you will keep your temper. You may well point out to others where they are sinning, but you will do so in a kind and measured way.

9) Love keeps no record of wrongs

The next phrase is "Love keeps no record of wrongs". If you have love in your heart you are not going to keep on going on over and over in your mind all the ways in which you have been offended by other people. And you will not throw it back in their face when you get an opportunity. You will not be sullen towards them if you happen to see them. You will forgive because you have been forgiven.

Now you might say, "What about the person who has not asked to be forgiven? He has hurt me badly and he has not asked to be forgiven. How can I forgive that person?" The answer is that you must have a forgiving attitude towards that person. You need to have already forgiven him in your heart, so that if he then comes to you and says to you, "I'm sorry for what I've done," you can extend to him the forgiveness which is already in your heart towards him. You can, as it were, "contract" that forgiveness. The forgiveness then becomes a part of your relationship.

But even if that forgiveness has not been asked for there must still be that forgiveness in your heart towards him. After all, have you never sinned? How

do you want to be treated by your friends and family when you have sinned? What do you hope for? You hope that you will be treated in a forgiving way. You hope that God will treat you in a forgiving way. So you must do the same to those who have hurt you.

10) Love does not rejoice in evil but rejoices with the truth

Paul then says "Love does not rejoice in evil but rejoices with the truth." This touches on one of the most perverse aspects of our fallen nature, that we are capable of actually taking delight in the failings of another person. We hear of another Christian who has fallen into sin and we gloat over what has happened. Or we hear about a church split somewhere and smugly say to ourselves "Thank God we are not like that." How terrible it is that we should do that, but that is the wickedness that is in our hearts.

The apostle says that if we are loving we will not delight in the sins and failings of others. Instead we will grieve over those things and we will pray for those who have fallen - even if they have a different outlook from ourselves. We will try to visit them and try to bring them back.

Instead, love rejoices with the truth. If you have love in your heart you will be glad when somebody understands the Gospel. You will be glad when he repents of his sins. You will be glad when justice prevails.

11) Love always protects

In verse 7 the word "always" is used four times. What the apostle means by this, I suggest, is that, as a rule, a person who is loving will always behave in a certain way. The first "always" is that love always protects. What this means literally is that love always covers over. As a rule, a loving person will cover over the offences of others, and not expose them to the public. If you love someone and that person does something bad you are going to do your utmost to keep that disguised. You are not going to publish what he has done because you will want his reputation to remain intact as much as possible. You would hate to have your name blackened, so equally you hate to see somebody else's name blackened. And so if you love somebody you will tell another person about that person's faults only if it is strictly necessary to protect somebody else or the wider church from harm. Otherwise you will keep quiet about what you know about that person's faults.

12) Love always trusts

The apostle then says that "Love always trusts". A loving person will believe the best about others. This does not mean to say that we should be gullible. Being gullible is not loving, because being gullible means that you deliberately turn a blind eye to things that are staring you in the face about a person's sinfulness. That is not loving to you or to anybody else. But if you love, if there are two possible constructions that can be put on some events that you've observed, you will put the best possible construction upon those events that you can. Or if you hear a bad tale about somebody else, until you have had a chance to verify the matter you will say to yourself "There must be some other explanation." You will not immediately jump to conclusions and say, "Oh, that terrible so and so! I always knew he was no good!" You will check out the facts first before you believe anything bad about that person. Love always trusts.

13) Love always hopes

Paul then says love always hopes. Here is this person, this family member who is really giving you grief, really letting you down. But with faith in God you say "He can yet change. He can yet be converted." Or if he is backsliding "they can yet come back to God". You never give up. You will always hope that there is something good yet to come. You will say to yourself "I don't know the end of the story yet. He might yet make a fine Christian."

14) Love always perseveres

The final things Paul says in this description of love is that love always perseveres. You love someone and he lets down. If you love that person you will persevere with him. So you love him again. And he lets you down again. Yet you still love him. And then he lets down again, and then again, and on and on, and yet you keep persevering in your love form him. Why? Because that is what God does with us. He perseveres with us. And thank God he does, because if God did not persevere with us he would have thrown up his hands in despair with us a long time ago and chucked us all away. Every single one of us. He perseveres with us and so we must do the same with each other.

How do you match up against this description of love? If you are anything like me you will have to put "failed" against all fourteen characteristics that Paul mentions here. What should we do if we fall short?

The first thing is that you have got to become a true Christian, if you are not one already. You cannot truly love if you are not a Christian. It is impossible to love properly without the Holy Spirit. So the first thing is, if you are not yet a Christian, come to Christ. Confess to God, "I'm a sinner. I need to be saved. I can't love. Change me." Look to Christ, and his death on the Cross, to be the only means by which you can be put right with God.

What should you do if you are a Christian? Go through the characteristics of love above and ask God to show you specific thoughts you have thought, specific actions you have done, and specific words you have said which have been unloving. The great danger, when we read a challenging book or article, is that we say to ourselves, "That was very challenging. I feel really depressed." But that does not do any good at all. Instead, go through it, point by point, and say "God, show me specific thoughts and specific actions that have not been right." Confess those specific sins to God and say, for example, "God I have sinned because I have been impatient with so and so." Confess your sins to God, and receive God's forgiveness through Christ.

Having confessed your sins to God, you then need to do what you can to put things right with those you have wronged. Go and see that person to whom you have been unloving and say to him, "I have been convicted because I have not been loving towards you as I should have been." Ask for his forgiveness.

Then having confessed your sins to God, and having done what you can to put things right with others, from then on fix your heart upon the love of God. Keep on thinking about God's love for you. Every day make it your top priority, before you get on with your list of jobs for the day, to set your heart again upon the love of God. Think of how he gave his only begotten Son for your sins on the Cross. Think of the patience he has shown with you. And ask him to fill you afresh with the Holy Spirit so that you can be loving towards the people who are around you

3. Love is eternal

The last section of the chapter, verses 8 – 13, is saying that love never ends. The gifts that the Corinthians were so excited about were going to come to an end. When Christ comes again there will be no more need for spiritual gifts. But love will last for ever. It is eternal. And everything that is done which is truly loving, which is done by the power of the Holy Spirit, will also last forever.

And it will be rewarded. Remember Jesus said "If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matthew 10.41) Every little kind word, every little smile and every little bit of gentleness done by the power of the Holy Spirit will be rewarded by God. It lasts forever. Whereas the worries and pleasures of this world, the things we tend to think are so important, will be gone in a flash.

So remember what this passage is talking about is the most important thing in the world. What life is all about. Make it your aim, above everything else in your life, to be loving in the way this passage describes.

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