

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13
LOVE IS... PART 2

Love is... we have already looked at the qualities of love; on the screen there are a few examples of a cartoon series that are all headed "love is..." (available on www.duckduckgo.com) and are about all kinds of other ways of finishing the sentence "love is..." You may find yourself laughing at some of them, then realising that they have a point. I came across a pair of these cartoons a while ago: the first of them had the caption "cleaning his bathtub!" and the second was "cleaning your own bathtub!" as ways of expressing love. You can see where that's going! But there are other ways of finishing sentence "love is..." and some these arise out of this wonderful piece of writing that is 1 Corinthians 13, the "greatest, strongest, deepest thing Paul ever wrote" according to one scholar. It is all about relationships: we read it at weddings because it is all about relationships and we take that into marriage; it was written to a church about relationships in Corinth that obviously were not as good as they should be; it was written about the quality of relationships and if ever there was a time in our society when people needed to know about good relationships, then it is now!

Love is *absolutely essential*: there is no getting away from that; the quality of love is totally necessary in every good human relationship. "*If I speak...*" (1 Corinthians 13:1f) Spiritual gifts are in the background: we can speak in tongues, we can have a word of prophecy, we can understand great mysteries of the faith and profess a deep and life-shaping faith; what is all that worth if there is no love? Nothing! "*I am... I gain...*" (1 Corinthians 13:2f) I can have all the gifts and maybe boast about them all, but if there is no love in my heart for my fellow-Christians in the life of the church, then having these gifts is worth absolutely nothing! Love is absolutely essential for the Christian and for the church. If you read 1 Corinthians all the way through you will see that things weren't always happy in Corinth: in chapters 1 and 3, we get an idea of divisions in the church, divisions that centred on some of the church leaders; I'm not saying that they promoted this, but the Christians in Corinth developed this. Some thought Paul was the best, others thought Apollos, others thought Peter and others thought that they would be super-spiritual and say that Jesus was the best; so the church had factions and groups. At other times Paul describes them as children, immature, needing to grow up in their thinking, because they were behaving like children. Here was a church where love was absolutely essential in the Christians' way of thinking.

Nothing has changed! Love is absolutely essential for the life of the church today; without love for one another and for others, we are nothing; all we do is an empty blast of air! We can have all the best mission strategies, all the best plans and programmes, all the best music and visuals, but if the spirit of love is missing, it is all empty. That's what Paul says; it is worthless, we are nothing, we gain nothing. Let me give you an example from one of the less obvious qualities on Paul's list: "*it always protects*". What does that mean? What does love protect? Love protects the most vulnerable people in our community; love challenges us to bear one another's burdens and stand side by side with people who are hurting. Love protects reputations and the truth so that when someone starts to spread a rumour that takes away a reputation wrongly, we snuff out that rumour rather than gossip it on; so we protect one another from the attacks of the evil one. Love is absolutely essential.

Love is the *tone of church life*. "*If I...*" (1 Corinthians 13:2) "*And now...*" (1 Corinthians 13:13) Do you want to come to church and hug everyone around you? No, I thought not! But that's not what this is about. The tone of church life is to be shaped by love; the atmosphere of church is to be love. A couple of weeks ago we talked about Jesus being Lord and that we could do everything in a way that reflects Jesus as Lord of our lives. This is another way of looking at all the things we do: everything we do that involves us with other people, needs to be done in a spirit of love. Nothing we do is about us and our getting our own way; everything we do should be done with love in our hearts for other people. That means a whole lot of things, sometimes that seem to contradict. We need to bear one another's burdens and share

one another's pain; but we also need to respect someone's desire to keep the details of that pain to themselves! We need to bear one another's burdens, but respect the times when the information we have (or think we have) is for keeping to ourselves. That restraint is also an act of love, protecting people who are weak and vulnerable. Love is to be the tone of our church life. What do we want to be known for? That the tone and atmosphere of our church is love for one another?

Love is *endless*. "Love never..." (1 Corinthians 13:8) Love will never go away; love is the quality that will always shape our relationships, will always challenge us to help people in need, will always be something we need to receive as well as give. Even in heaven we will love God and love other people. 2000 years on from the time when Paul wrote these words to a fractious church in Corinth, these words are still powerful; they still speak to us of the qualities of our relationships; people still hear them read and are left amazed by their power. We still need to know what it means to love and be loved: I listen to young people who simply want to be loved, teenagers who are made to feel unloved at home or by their friends and all they want is to be loved. Older people, perhaps in danger of being forgotten by society, shut-in for no fault of their own – all they want is to be loved! Love is the basic human need; everyone needs to be loved and we all have the capacity to give that love to others. The need to love and be loved is endless and the quality itself is endless.

Finally, love is *something God does*. God is patient, kind, generous, forgiving and all the other of these 15 qualities. This is a deep affirmation about God that we don't always feel; but it is an affirmation of faith – this is what we believe God is like; "Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so." This is how we are loved by God. Psalm 71 has a quite intimate encounter between the psalmist and God in which he speaks about God as the One who saves, delivers, and loves; God is the one on whom he has relied all his life; God saw him, and loved him even before he was born! All this love inspires our trust and hope and even confidence! Love is something God does for us and we learn to trust Him. Because love is something God does, we are both inspired and challenged to treat other people in the same way; we love because God loved us first. God is love. It is easy to say, hard to do, but the challenge of our lives is to love others as Jesus has loved us.

Love is absolutely essential; love is the tone and atmosphere of church, love is endless, love is something God does. We are all a work in progress! There are times when we get this right; there are times when we get it horribly wrong. There are times when our words are an expression of love and care; there are other times when the things we say hurt and wound. "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me" – it's a lie! There are times when we remember to care for people in need; there are times we simply think about ourselves. Don't claim to be a paragon of virtue, but recognise that God loves you as you are and learn to be better at love for others! In the end, simply do it; for all the sermons that are preached, the bottom line is this – do it and love one another well.