



Session 6 – 1Corinthians 13

THE WAY OF LOVE

The Corinthian church was rich in spiritual gifts (**1:4-9**) but also immature (**3:1-4**). It was divided and ‘young’ in its attitudes and behaviour. **1Cor 13:11** is a key text: immaturity is natural at the start of the Christian life, but the Corinthians had been slow to grow.

In **1Cor 13**, Paul writes about love: it is not another gift but a virtue which should be seen in every Christian and which should characterise the way they use their gifts. It is the “most excellent way” (**12:31b**). Without love, their gifts are of no value.

Love is to be the only motive for using any spiritual gift.

1. v.1-3 The need for love

Paul is not denigrating the gifts he lists here; they are God-given. He is simply stressing that they must be used with love. Without love, the activities of **12:8-10** are useless.

He begins with the gift of tongues of humans and angels (**v.1**) – speech inspired by the Spirit. Without love, they make an empty and hollow sound. He gives other examples from his list in **12:8-10** – prophecy, knowledge and faith (**v.2**). Those who exercise such things without love are wasting their time. Even great self-sacrifice – giving to the poor – is a waste of time without love. To sacrifice life itself (eg martyrdom) gains no reward from God without love (**v. 3**). In each and every case, it will be empty and valueless unless the person involved acts with love.

Without love, nothing is pleasing to God.

2. v.4-7 The nature and character of love

Patient – literally ‘has a long nose’ – takes a deep breath before responding. Love is patient with people in spite of any harm they do – as is God (eg **Rom 2:4, 1Tim 1:16, 2 Pet 3:9,15**).

Kind – gives itself in the service of others, even those who have been hurtful. God’s kindness is described in **Rom 2:4, 11:22, Eph 2:7**.

Not envious or boastful – not jealous of the success or gifts of others; not causing envy in others by boasting about its own achievements.

Not proud – unlike the Corinthians (**4:6,18-19; 5:2**) who were puffed-up. *‘What is party spirit other than oneself writ large?’*

Not rude – wrong sexual behaviour, coarse words, indecent behaviour: all are ruled out. *‘Love avoids the whole range of unseemliness.’*

Does not insist on its own way – the opposite of self-centeredness. Paul has already warned the Corinthians about this (**10:24**); they should be willing to give things up for the sake of others (**10:33**).

Not easily angered – or touchy, or prone to lose one’s temper. Compare the description of God in **Ps 103:8** – a description which is echoed in many other places in OT.

My Christian neighbour ‘can get dreadfully on my nerves even in the exercise of what he regards as, and what may well be, his particular gifts... love cannot alter the fact that he gets on my nerves; but ... it can rule out... my allowing myself to be “provoked” by him’.

Keeps no records of wrongs, is not resentful – important for a church like Corinth, riddled with factions... ‘does not harbour a sense of injury’. To do that would be to nurse grudges and allow anger to keep burning. Paul wants his readers to have the same attitude to others that God has to us – not counting our sins against us (**2Cor 5:19**).

Does not rejoice in wrongdoing but in the truth We are not to be pleased at the failings of others – nor to gossip about them – but should

rejoice at the truth. Anything that is true to the gospel, anything that is in keeping with God's good ways, is something in which we should join with others in celebrating. Love takes no joy in evil of any kind.

Always protects, trusts, hopes, endures – looks for the best in people, is open to accept, hopes for the best, gives the benefit of the doubt, looks to ultimate triumph by the grace of God, keeps going whatever the difficulties.

It is often said that, if we read this paragraph (v.4-7) with the name *Jesus* substituted for the word *love*, it makes perfect sense as a description of Jesus and his ministry. Paul's main aim here, though, is to challenge his readers to live lives characterised by love; so we might read the paragraph with our own name substituted, ask ourselves whether it rings true, and repent where appropriate.

3. v.8-13 The permanence of love

"Love never fails" – ie it never comes to an end. Paul contrasts this with gifts such as prophecy, tongues and knowledge which will not be needed in the age to come after the return of Jesus. When we see the Lord face-to-face, those gifts he has given us to help us to know him and to live as his people through our earthly life will no longer be needed.

- Just as one sort of behaviour is appropriate to childhood but not to adulthood, so gifts are appropriate to the present life of the church but not to its future life (v.11). Maturity comes when Jesus returns. Gifts remind us that we are still imperfect beings living in an imperfect world.
- Just as seeing someone in a mirror is not the same as seeing them in the flesh, our present experience of God is not to be compared with the wonderful experience of seeing him which we shall have when Jesus returns (v.12). Then, we will need no gifts to help us know him.

All our wisdom and knowledge are a poor reflection of what it will be in the new creation. Then we will know God as deeply as he knows us.

The one thing that is constant both in this age and the age to come is the thing that characterises the very person of God: that eternal quality is **LOVE** (see eg **1John 4:7-16**). We do not have to wait for the perfection of heaven; love – in particular love, shown in the way we use the gifts which God has given us – is for this life too.

Paul has given his antidote to divisiveness in Corinth and a correction of their misguided views of what true 'spirituality' is.

For homegroups

1. Why is this section on love included in Paul's letter?
2. What practical difference will love make to the use of our gifts?
3. Can you give examples of ways in which gifts could be used unlovingly?
4. Why should this passage shame and humble us?
5. After Paul's final "Love is not . . ." he also gives the opposite: "Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices at the truth." Are there positive words or phrases to do the same for the other seven "Love is nots"?
6. When is it most difficult to be patient? For each of the other characteristics of love, can you suggest in what circumstances it is hardest to act in that way?
7. Can you think of occasions when these characteristics of love were demonstrated by Jesus?
8. How does love cope with the weaknesses, sins and failures of others?
9. Read 1John 3:2. What difference will it make to you to see Jesus face to face? How does the future of heaven spur us on to the maturity of love in this life?