

Love is the key

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[0 : 00] So we're being a bit poetical tonight. Well towards the end of Shakespeare's play Macbeth. Macbeth is largely a fictional character. There was a King Macbeth but the play doesn't bear much relation to the actual historical Macbeth.

But towards the end of the play at this point Macbeth has just heard that his wife has died and he realises that his enemies are all massing against him.

And he says this famous speech. It's perhaps not surprising that Shakespeare would suggest that life is a play but well let's read the whole thing.

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

So at the end of at least the life of at least the fictional Macbeth, that's the reflection on his life. A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury but signifying nothing.

[1 : 14] So hold that thought as we come and look at this chapter. I've lost my remote, there it is. Now, it's a very familiar chapter of course and we often read it when we think about Christian love.

But I think it is true that we very often actually do remove it from its context. I used it when I did a funeral oration for my mother.

But then I certainly didn't put it in the context. And actually if you look at the context you can see that he is putting it here for a reason. It's not just suddenly thought it would be nice to have a discussion of Christian love.

And then he picks up the argument again in chapter 14 verse 1.

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts. So at the end of chapter 12 he thinks, yeah I'm going to tell them to desire spiritual gifts.

[2 : 25] But they need a warning at this point. Why should they desire the spiritual gifts? And how should they be seeking them? It's not that Paul is saying all you need is love.

Because he's of course actually told us that we need all these other things. But he says of course love is what makes, well, we need to follow the way of love to desire the spiritual gifts.

That's what he says in chapter 14 verse 1. And in fact if you'll notice that in the first few verses of chapter 13.

He actually mentions the various spiritual gifts that he's talked about before. He talks about tongues. He talks about prophecy.

He talks about fathoming all mysteries, knowledge, discerning spirits perhaps. Something like that. He talks about faith. Faith was described as a spiritual gift earlier on.

[3 : 31] And he talks about giving possessions to the poor. Helping others. Again, it was described as a spiritual gift. And then he adds one more thing to the list here.

He talks about surrender my body to the flames. Now people have actually puzzled about what that means. Because of course the Romans didn't actually normally burn people. But clearly some form of martyrdom is implied here.

I know that some manuscripts read given my body to boast. But clearly he's in some sense talking about giving up life itself. And so in a sense he's talking about how we should desire these gifts.

But we need to do it in a way that follows the way of love. And in a sense he ups the ante and said, I could even give up my life itself. But if I don't do it in the right way, then I'm wasting my time.

And I'd like to spend actually a little bit of time looking at these first verses. We often kind of scoot over rather quickly. But I don't think we should actually.

[4 : 42] Because I think he's saying something quite significant here. Look at the first illustration. He says, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

So he's saying I may not just speak in human tongues. I might speak like an angel. I don't know anything about the language of angels, but the implication I'm sure is that it would be higher and more beautiful than any human language.

And yet he says you can do that. You can speak even in the tongues of angels. And you can make plenty of noise, but no music. You're just making a horrible racket, a cacophony.

That's what he says, isn't it? I'm just a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. I'm reminded of that. The older ones amongst us will remember that famous sketch of Eric Morecambe when he played with the London Symphony Orchestra.

And he said, Andre Previn was conducting, and he says, You're playing the wrong notes. And Eric Morecambe replies, No, I'm playing the right notes, but just not in the right order.

[6 : 00] And the result, of course, is chaos. And in fact, Paul picks this up again in chapter 14 in verse 7. He says, So love, says Paul, is what drives the melody, or perhaps what is the melody.

It's what makes all the parts of the orchestra play together. So there's symphony. I don't think they had symphony orchestras in Rome, but we can think of a symphony orchestra, can't we?

Symphony orchestra, when everybody does their own thing, you occasionally hear a really bad symphony orchestra. And it's chaos, cacophony. You can't make any sense of it.

But when the orchestra plays together, then something beautiful results. So he says, first of all, love is the melody that makes sense of it.

And then he gives us another illustration. He says, well, you might be a spiritual superstar.

[7 : 18] Notice he picks up a couple of things here, actually from Jesus. Jesus' words himself. Jesus has said, if you have a faith like a grain of mustard seed, no, grain of sand, sorry.

And, I can't remember what it was now. Anyway, he says, if you have just a small bit of faith, and you ask God to throw that mountain into the sea, it will be done for you.

I don't think we ever read that anybody took this literally. And yet, Paul says, well, suppose you did take that literally. Suppose you had faith that you could work extraordinary miracles.

You could actually move a mountain. You could be a superstar. Or perhaps you could be a theological genius.

Perhaps you could write a textbook, a theological textbook, of such genius and understanding that it makes Calvin's Institutes read like a child's comic.

[8 : 18] Perhaps they'll remember your name a thousand years hence. But what does Paul say? He says, actually, if you do all that without love, you're not a superstar, you're a nobody.

You're a big fat zero. A person of no significance whatsoever.

If you do all these things without love. Because without love, none of this has any meaning at all.

And then he goes to the investment bank.

And remember that Jesus had said, why not give away your, sell your belongings, give them to your poor, give them to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven.

But Paul says, well, you could do that. You could give all I possess to the poor. You could invest not just your life savings, but everything you have.

[9 : 23] Even life itself. And then you go and check your balance in the bank of heaven. And what do you find? You find that your account is empty.

You've got nothing in return. There's no profit in it. That again is what the word actually means. It means, or perlelio, I think it is. It means there's no profit.

You've been scammed. You're like one of these people who've, you hear on the television, who have invested all their money in some scam. They thought they were going to get something back.

But when they come to cash it in, they find that there's nothing there.

And Paul says, it's very much like that. If you do invest not only all your life savings, give them to the poor, but even your own life itself, even your own body, when you come and check on your credit at the bank of heaven, it will read empty.

You have nothing to show for it. So really quite remarkable things. Now you could argue and say, well, could you actually do some of these things without love, without the power of the Holy Spirit?

[10 : 30] But possibly not. But I think that's the point. That's not the point. I think the point he is making is that it's actually love that gives all these things meaning.

It's love that is the melody. It's love that is the, that makes you a somebody, that makes you somebody significant. It's love that is the profit.

If you do, if you give your possessions to the poor with love, then you will have treasure in heaven. That's where you get your profit back. And in fact, what Paul is saying later on, in fact, is you need to grow up.

It says that in verse 11. The word translated, that's verse 10, sorry. The word translated perfect is teleos. It means complete or completed or finished, but it can mean grown up.

And I think that's the point that Paul is making here. A child perhaps will hammer on the piano, but you don't get a recognizable tune.

[11:39] A child will scribble in bright colors on a bit of paper, but you can't make sense of the picture. There's no recognizable picture. And a child would argue why he should or should not be allowed to do things, but generally speaking, the arguments don't make any sense.

He says, you need to grow up. You need to be mature in your thinking. Think like an adult here. And think what you're really doing. Children, so temper tantrums.

When we grow up, we shouldn't. We do sometimes, but of course we do sometimes behave like children. But we shouldn't. So Paul tells us to grow up.

And childish knowledge may even seem impressive. And actually it is interesting. I don't want to go too much into Greek here, but I'm no Greek expert myself. But it is interesting actually that two different words are used for knowledge in this passage.

In verse 2 and verse 8, well in fact three different words. In verse 2 and verse 8, it's the usual word for knowledge, gnosis. And that means kind of a body of knowledge, a body of knowledge, a body of things that we understand, a science or something like that.

[12:56] In verse 2 he says, when he talks about fathoming all mysteries, it's aido, which literally means to see or to understand. He's saying, you know, you have insight. But later on he uses different word for knowledge in verses 9 and 12.

And well in verse 9 and the first thing in verse 12, he uses the word ginosko, which means to learn or to gain knowledge. So it's not so much as possessing a body of knowledge, but to be learning or studying or gaining knowledge or something.

And then in the second and third references in verse 12, when he says, then I know fully even as I am fully known, he uses a different form of the word, epi ginosko, which is obviously a stronger form.

Phil has told us this before, if you put epi on the front of something in Greek, it means it makes it stronger. But actually, that means to learn thoroughly or actually to recognise, some of the translations say to recognise.

So he makes this knowledge personal and relational. He says that it's not just a knowledge of a body of truth, because that can pass away, but it's a personal knowledge, something that's heart knowledge, that's something that is recognising and obviously the implication here that recognises Christ, even as he will fully recognise us.

[14:30] So, again, this change of word here implies that he's moving from not something that's abstract to something that's relational, about relationships, about something that's in the heart and not just in the head as we say.

So, we can say, is... Well, we can say perhaps that what Paul's getting at here is that actually love is the meaning.

Is our life just a show, like Macbeth? Or is it... Well, not just a show, but is it, as he says, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury?

There's lots going on, but it signifies nothing. If I want to make music, I'd better learn how to play properly. If I want to make an investment, then I need to be diligent about it.

I need to check that everything is in order before I commit my money. And if I want to be a somebody, I actually need to achieve something real, something that actually has meaning.

[15:45] who have apparently done nothing significant at all, don't we? I'm sure if it existed in his days, Paul might have referred to OK Magazine or these other magazines that people are celebrities just for being celebrities.

But, no, says Paul, if you really want to be a celebrity as far as the kingdom of heaven is concerned, you need to have achieved something real And that meaning is found through love.

And the Corinthians seem to have had the same problem. They had, in a sense, lots of power. They had lots going on. They had all the sound and the fury.

But did it signify anything? And then, Paul reminds us that we need to be having things that foreshadow eternity, that are permanent. In verse 13, he says, these remain, faith, hope and love. Now, of course, in one sense, we can't be complete, we can't be permanent in this life. But, he's saying, nevertheless, we should be hanging on to those things that are of eternal, permanent value. [17:08] And those things, specifically, he mentions faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. These are the things that foreshadow eternity. And so, having said that, we better look at what sort of love he's talking about.

Now, it's not just a warm, sticky feeling. Clearly, it's not even a furious passion. Now, sometimes, the Bible does talk about Christian love in those ways.

I mean, if you don't believe me, just go away and read the whole of the Song of Solomon. The Song of Solomon is about love as passion. But, the love that he talks about here is somewhat different. This is the love that lasts, perhaps almost when the passion has dissipated. This is the love, perhaps, of a mature marriage. Which is marked, well, we'll see what it's marked by, but things like patience.

Passion is not normally marked by patience. And passion, to be honest, sometimes can be self-seeking. It seeks the experience itself. But, the love that Paul is talking about here is something different.

[18:28] And it is the thing that really survives into eternity. In eternity, faith and hope will be fulfilled. But love continues even into the kingdom of heaven in its fullness.

It's the greatest of them all because it carries on. Love is what will survive. Love is what, the melody that turns the noise into the music. That turns the folly into the sound investment.

And as he says, love, if you want to think of a show, love is the stage that won't collapse under you. Verse 8, that's where it says, love never fails.

Again, the literal meaning meaning is to fall down. Love won't collapse. you won't find that when you're delivering your speech suddenly falls through a hole and collapses on you.

You find that it's something that's firm that you can stand on. It won't give up or run out when you need it. So, Paul is talking here about love that's entirely other-centred.

[19:37] And the context here is, of the desiring the higher gifts. And I think when we need Paul's description of love, we probably should keep that in mind. How are we to go about desiring the higher gifts?

So, Paul tells us some things that love is and some things that love isn't. Let's look first of all at the things that love is.

So he says, it's kind, it rejoices in the truth, it protects, it trusts, it hopes, it perseveres.

If you're interested in such things, there are seven things that love is and eight things that love is not. of significance, but let's not go into that. this is the list of what love is.

And if I may bother, borrow the slogan from Sky, we might say that love is, this list is all about believing in better, if something's not right in our relationship with a fellow believer, it's all about sticking with it.

[20:49] It's all about sticking with it. Just as, in a marriage, if something starts to go wrong, you need to stick with it and you need to be patient and kind. They're not words that are associated with passion exactly, They're words that are associated with a steadfast love.

It's not about, it's about sticking with it, it's about trying to repair To prepare.! To prepare. To prepare. To prepare. To prepare.

To prepare. right when they're not but it's about seeking the good in and of others and if because of our patience that other person or group eventually surpasses us then we'll be glad of that won't we if we have this sort of love we'll be glad for them knowing that we had a hand in it you can think of good examples of this can't we have Barnabas out of his depth in Antioch so what does he do he goes and finds Paul and brings him there knowing that Paul is going to take over from him is a sense in the leader leadership of the Antioch church but he says yes I've done my best for this church I've put the right person in the right place and he will rejoice over that it's about Farrell isn't it well you may not know the story of Farrell but when John Calvin was escaping from France persecution in France and he reached Geneva on his way intending to flee on into Switzerland away from the French authorities who were after him and William I think it's William Farrell anyway was one of the reformers in Calvin in Geneva at the time and he intercepted Calvin on his way through and said no you should be here this is the place where you can use your great learning in

the service of the church and so well you may have heard of William Farrell probably everybody's heard of John Calvin but Farrell is mainly known now perhaps for that for realizing that Calvin was the person who needed to be there in Geneva he was the person who could lead what was going to become an absolutely strategic church and he rejoiced that he became less and Calvin became more as it were in that place but what about that Methodist preacher we were hearing about just on Wednesday in the in the DVD I don't know that we even know his name do we I don't think we do even Spurgeon described he was an uneducated country preacher and yet his words had tremendous power but he found the young Charles Spurgeon in his chapel and spoke to him and of course Spurgeon was to become a far greater preacher than he was but when the accounts are opened in heaven will these people going to be jealous of the other success surely not because they'll rejoice in fact that God allowed them a small but vital part in that work of in his great work and those men at least have a footnote in history we know about them because they're recorded but many will not even have that how many words have been spoken to people and we have no idea what their effect was we have no idea that they've changed the world of course there's no record of them but there is a record of them the record is kept in heaven and so they're remembered in God's record and they acted out of love for Christ and the church and so they do indeed have treasure in heaven we could say their life is not noise but it's beautiful music it may only be a sub-theme something that is not heard above the greater theme of the symphony as it were but it's something that contributes something beautiful a melody that contributes something beautiful to the music and they are the true celebrities in God's kingdom who built with gold, silver and precious stones C.S. Lewis has a nice illustration of this in The Great Divorce when he's taken on a bus tour of heaven if you've ever read The Great Divorce and he comes along a beautiful girl who's dancing and singing I think with I can't remember the exact details but with some retinue behind her and he wonders of course if this is the Virgin Mary and his guide says no that was just Mary who lived in Finchley or something like that but she's beautiful in the kingdom because of the things that she did she's great in the kingdom of heaven so these are the things that make sense of these gifts when we have this love that seeks the good in others that seeks to make them better even than ourselves seeks to put them above ourselves and say let's do what is best for the love and the kingdom of God and the love of Christ wake up and Paul also tells us what love is not and love is not saying I told you so love is not envious we don't envy when somebody has more success than we do we're not like Robert Murray McShane who was told that revival had broken out in the Dundee church while he was away in Israel was he envious that he hadn't been there no of course not he was delighted it's not boastful it doesn't say well yeah I mean that's okay but this is much better I'm much better at it it's not proud it's not rude it says sometimes Christians who have you know scored some of these alright have been rude to others I quoted that rhyme you know the good are so harsh the good are so harsh to the clever and the rude the clever so no it's the other way around isn't it the good's so rude to the clever I think it is sometimes people who have been rude haven't they but love says Paul is not rude you correct your opponents if you have to but you do it with gentleness it's not self-seeking it's really just saying the same thing again isn't he in different words to make the point it doesn't seek its own benefit he's going to go on to say that what spiritual gifts you have should seek the benefit of the church they're not there for your own entertainment or for your own pleasure or for your own joy even but rather for the joy of all and it's not irritable it's interesting actually he puts this one at the end it's not easily angered the NIV translates it you might have put that earlier up you might have thought but I think it's the opposite of patience in a sense isn't it you're easily things just get to you too easily and we all have that sometimes don't we some very trivial thing will set us off because we're in a bad place to start with but love says no you shouldn't be irritable and those are things that love isn't and then he tells us two things that love doesn't do and the first one it doesn't keep a spreadsheet it doesn't keep an account and again it is an accounting word it says it keeps no record of wrongs it's the idea of an accountant or a record keeper or a clerk noticing when somebody's done something silly and written it down and it actually does have even the implication of arithmetic of actually adding them up you know you put three black marks there four black marks there and then when you get to the bottom you total them up it almost has that implication are you keeping a record of what people have done wrong it doesn't delight in evil but instead it rejoices with the truth so he says it doesn't delight when things go wrong and again that's the opposite in rejoicing in the truth isn't it when we say it's saying

[31 : 20] I told you so isn't it we always knew that person or group would go wrong and when they were successful we were envious of them we promote ourselves against them and we compare ourselves favourably with them we add up all the mistakes they make and we can just see where they're heading and then when of course they actually do come a cropper in the end we're delighted because we say it shows that we were right all along all along but Paul says no we shouldn't be taking that attitude if they do get into if people do get into trouble we certainly shouldn't be delighting in that rather we should be seeking to put right which is wrong as best we can and so in short we could say are we self-centred or are we relationship centred and the trouble with tongues as Paul says is that they're largely self-centred he says that in chapter 14 verse 2 and 4 they may give me a spiritual boost but they're likely to make fellow believers feel inadequate now there are exceptions and I think later on in 14 he mentions one of them but often they simply give the you as boost but they're not really much use to anybody else and in fact so often they're used in exactly that way aren't they to make others feel spiritually inadequate you know it's a fairly in one sense it's a fairly easy thing but it shows you know you reach the next stage spiritually and that's exactly how the

Corinthians were using it and unfortunately they're so often used that way today as well so if you're going to use tongues then they need to be relationship centred and it's not always clear how you do that but even when churches do go down that route then we need to remember that we shouldn't be writing them off but we should be doing what we can to put things right which is of course what Paul is doing here it may be very difficult to do that we may not know how to go about it but that at least should be our aim so it's much better to be a prophet Paul says that in chapter 14 verse 1 but still he asks why do you want to be a prophet or why do you want to gain some other gift the gift of prophecy or the gift of helping others is it to display your own spiritual insight is it to proclaim the sins of others to make you seem more holy and that's what Paul is warning us against that's more or less what the Corinthians were doing and we can always there's always a danger of us heading into that area and if we do we are heading for a fall love won't fall love won't collapse under us but you don't you never know enough you never know everything and your prophecy will cease and at best you've just seen a little bit further than others

Isaac Newton said if I've seen further than others it's because I stood on the shoulders of giants at best we've just seen a little bit further than others but if you have love you won't fall and so before you take up the role of the prophet or the teacher or any other gifts we need to make sure that we come under the everyone of 14 verse 3 everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening encouragement and comfort and the implication is surely that if we try and prophesy not doing that or if we try and exercise any other gift not doing that then we're not really doing it at all and we're certainly not doing it in terms of love it's a matter of we're back to the cacophony the noise the investment that's just a scam with no profit so finally

Paul has this little bit at the end these three remain faith hope and love but the greatest of these is love it's a day of trouble for western churches as we were thinking about this morning everyone seems to have a scheme to put it right don't they evangelistic initiatives and programs are everywhere new church models are to a penny and we are told that we need a new George Whitefield or a Charles Spurgeon or a Martin Lloyd-Jones we're told that we need more spiritual power I'm sure we do but we're told we're given a whole spectrum of ideas as to what that actually means don't we from you know anointed preachers that we need the doctor back again we need Martin Lloyd-Jones or Whitfield back again so new forms of worship or to healing miracles well I'm sure that we do need some or all of these things the church is always being born anew from the word and yet Paul's recipe for a church in trouble actually seems to be going back to basics isn't he he's saying at least that we shouldn't be trusting in gimmicks prophecy knowledge tongues miracles even martyrdom can only ever be incomplete a partial solution he's saying we need at least to start with the things that really matter the things that really last of course he's not certainly not saying we don't need prophecy in fact in the next chapter he's going to go on to say that is exactly what you need but he's saying first get back to basics a faith a trust that God keeps his promises this is is that the same faith that moves mountains

I don't know but it doesn't seem to be does it there seems a different tone here he's saying faith is long term faith patient faith not the faith that produces a spectacular miracle but of the faith that trusts that God will keep his promises and do what is promised and hope and we can think of hope being a trust that those promises will actually be of benefit to us I mean God keeps some promises some of God's promises are promises of wrath and judgment we wouldn't really hope for that would

we it says in one of the prophets why you hope for the day of the Lord the day of the Lord will be darkness not light we hope that those promises through Jesus Christ will be of benefit to us and finally he says love love is the greatest and most permanent of all these because God himself is love