

Love that Lasts

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Preacher: Tim Patrick

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 1st of August 2004. The preacher is Tim Patrick.

His sermon is entitled Love That Lasts and is based on 1 Corinthians chapter 13. The last couple of youth services we've had, we've had some sermons on spiritual gifts.

I don't know if you were here, if you remember that. But we had a couple of sermons talking about spiritual gifts in the church. And we talked about how everyone has got a gift for the benefit of others.

How no one can claim to have a gift that's more important than anyone else's or kind of a super gift. And that God has arranged all the different gifts in the church so that we're all working together like different parts of a body.

Well those sermons actually came from 1 Corinthians as well. They came from chapter 12 which is the chapter right before 1 Corinthians 13. Makes an awful lot of sense doesn't it?

[1 : 10] If you look at 1 Corinthians chapter 14, if you've got your Bibles open on page 934. If you just scan your eye over that, you'll notice that that chapter is also about spiritual gifts.

So chapter 12 we had this long discussion of spiritual gifts. Chapter 14 that discussion finishes. And in the middle we've got this really famous chapter on love.

This chapter is very well known, 1 Corinthians 13. It was read by Tony Blair at Princess Diana's funeral. It's read at many weddings. It's a very famous passage.

It's well known but not many people know that it's embedded right in the middle of a discussion about spiritual gifts. And that's very relevant to us. And as we look at it tonight, we need to keep that in our minds because that's going to help us make a lot more sense about the things that Paul has written here.

This isn't just a love poem. Just a kind of abstract. Here is a few musings on love. It is certainly beautiful and poetic. But it actually ties into a bigger point about spiritual gifts and the way they're exercised in the church.

[2 : 15] Well, you remember if you were here for those sermons that one of the big issues at the church in Corinth was this gift of tongues. Some people could talk in what they call talking in tongues, babbling away in angelic languages.

Words straight from God that you can't understand unless you've got the gift of interpreting those tongues. And some of the Corinthians were led to think that this gift of tongues is the most important gift and that's the mark of a super Christian.

Well, having spent lots of chapter 12 pulling that idea apart, Paul then goes on in chapter 13 to make a bigger point. To in fact say all the spiritual gifts, any of them, are all completely worthless if they're not exercised in love.

Look at how he begins. Three times he makes this point at the start. Verse 1. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, that's this thing that they're going on about at Corinth, but I don't have love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

That is, I'm just noise. There's no substance. There's nothing behind it. Just a racket. The same point again. If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith, these are great things, right?

[3 : 33] If I can speak God's words powerfully, if I'm full of understanding and knowledge, if I have incredible faith, these are great things you want to see in Christians, but if you have them without love, what does it say?

I am nothing. Verse 3. The point is pushed again with a different example. If I'm sacrificial, if I give away all my possessions, if I hand over my body so that I may boast, if I'm sacrificial, if I give away

everything I've got, even my life, for the service of other people, that's a great thing to do. That's really self-giving. But if you do it without love, I gain nothing. Do you see the point? Do you see the point Paul's making here in a very strong way?

The point is that spiritual gifts and ministries and services in the Christian church to one another, great as they may be, God-given as they are, are nothing if they don't proceed from love.

Love has to be behind the expression of all Christian living, or it's ultimately empty and vain. Have you ever been to a party where someone has gotten a fair few good presents, and then they get a kind of average present, and then someone says, it's the thought that counts.

[5 : 00] Often that's just a really bad attempt at making you feel better, like you get something out of it, it's a thought that counts, so great. But what about when that's a genuine sentiment? What about when that's not just a cop-out for getting a dud gift, but a genuine sentiment?

What about when someone says, happy 21st, I'm sorry, I really just can't afford a present, but I got you a card, and I really want to be here to celebrate with you. If you say it's the thought that counts then, I think that's actually a great thought.

That's a wonderful thought, it counts for a whole lot. There might not be an amazing gift to enjoy, but someone's shown you their love, which is more precious.

And think of the opposite case, the same point's true, isn't it? Happy 21st. Sorry, I can't come to the party. Sorry that I never make time to see you. Sorry I never return your calls, but hey, I spent 200 bucks on a gift for you.

It's probably more than anyone else did. Well, it's a thought that counts. What's the thought there? The gift might be amazing, a great \$200 present, but it's from someone who doesn't really give a stuff about you.

[6 : 09] It doesn't come from love. Now, if you just care about gifts, presents, material stuff, you might be happy with that. But if you love people and you treasure relationships like God does, like Christians should, then what will be most important to you isn't the gift, but what's behind it, the thought that counts.

or in the case of, in the context of our discussion of love, the love is what is really valuable. Sure, gifts are great things from God, but they must proceed from love if they're to be worth anything. This is what Paul is saying about Christian fellowship. Some of us here might have great gifts to share. In fact, I know some of us here have got great gifts to share because I've benefited from the gifts that some of you guys have got.

We might be really good at reading the Bible clearly to each other. We might be really good at thinking through the things we believe together, helping each other understand our faith. Someone here might be able to talk in tongues, I don't know.

We might be great at playing music and leading the congregation in songs of worship. We might be good at preaching. We might not. We might be good at praying for each other.

[7 : 24] We might be good at giving our time and our money and our energy to other people for their good. And these are great, great gifts for us to share with one another. But, what really makes a Christian fellowship is the fact that those things proceed from love.

If they don't, then we're just noisy gongs and clanging cymbals and everything we do is really nothing and church is just a game of pious cultural charades.

love has to be behind all our gifts of service and the ways we look after one another here. Well, if this is true, if everything that we do has to be motivated by love, love has to be behind the expression of Christian fellowship towards one another, then we need to know what love is.

It's well and good to say, oh, you've got to, it's got to come from love, but what is love? Well, Paul has given us a bit of a rundown in the next few verses. The next few verses, four to seven, go on to describe Christian love for us.

Now, I need to make an apology for you here. For those of you who don't like long sermons, I think it's worth us actually looking at each of the qualities of love in verses four to seven because if we don't, well, sorry, just as a way of starting off that, if we don't, I think we're skimming too quickly here.

[8 : 52] Now, this is going to take a little bit of time. So, apologies for those of you who want the kind of 15 minute get out of here sermon. You came to the wrong church service tonight. But, on the other hand, apologies to those of you who actually would like to hear more because you'll see as we go through we won't spend anywhere near enough time on these qualities.

I'm going to run down this list and kind of dissect love for us a little bit but by the end I hope you're all going, oh, we just scratched the surface. That sermon should have gone on for an hour and a half, two hours, three, we could have a sermon on each of those.

We probably could. So, my apologies if the sermon's too long. My apologies if it's too short. But, let's start having a look at love. What I've given you in your, the bunch of paper you got when you came in is this orange sheet.

This is a list taken straight from verses four to seven. If you want, you can take that out now and jot down notes on it. Just maybe, if you think of something, oh yeah, that's filling that picture out for me a bit more, you could do that.

But I've also given it to you so you can take it home and stick it to like your bathroom mirror or somewhere where you'll see it regularly and you can look over it and remember it and read it and keep thinking about it.

[10:00] There's a lot here and we won't exhaust it tonight. So, work on it now if you want, take it home but keep it in your mind. Let's have a think then. What's love? Well, love is made up at least of these qualities.

Love is patient. That is, love allows people time even when there are issues, even when there are problems.

See, a person with love doesn't react quickly against something or someone they don't like. something that's offended them we don't snap back in response if we're loving.

It's a great rebuke for me this because I know with my little two-year-old girl patience is a weakness I have and when I realise that I'm impatient with her I have to ask myself how is that loving her?

Love is patient. It's quite a hard thing to be, I find but that's part of Christian love. Love is kind.

[11:07] Love seeks to do good for other people. Notice, this is an active idea. Love doesn't just sit in the corner and not bother anyone. Like, love doesn't just keep its head down and not cause trouble.

No, love is positively, proactively kind. It goes out of its way to do good for other people. That's what Christian love's like.

It's kind, seeking the good of others. love is not envious. That is, love doesn't seek what someone else has got for itself.

This is a big issue again for the church in Corinth when, to who Paul originally wrote this letter.

Right, they're seeing these gifts of people talking in tongues and thinking, well, they're the super Christians. I wish I was like that.

No. Love isn't envious of what other people have. Love celebrates the good things that other people have. This is hard for us to learn, I think, because we live in a culture where we want all the stuff, right?

[12:07] If there's anything good out there, we want it. Give it to me. It's mine. You can't have something better than me. But love's not like that. It's not envious. Not according to Paul. Love's not boastful.

Boastfulness is kind of the flip side to envy, isn't it? Love doesn't big note itself. If envy's about wanting what other people have got, boasting is about, kind of being really proud about what you've got.

But love's not like that. It's not proud of itself. Not full of itself and wanting to brag. Love doesn't big note itself.

Love isn't arrogant. It's not overly self-assured or conceited. Love is not rude. love doesn't love doesn't behave in shameful or disgraceful ways that cause offence to other people.

A loving person's behaviour is good and proper. It doesn't offend. Love doesn't insist on its own way.

[13:21] This isn't saying that love has no interest in what's right and wrong. It's not saying that love doesn't believe in the truth about God. No, it's actually saying quite the opposite.

When you look through the rest of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, this first letter to the Corinthians, you'll see that this whole idea of not insisting on your own way comes up a bit.

If you read through chapters 8, 9 and 10, which is something you might like to do as you think a bit more about love, you'll see that in those chapters Paul recognises there are different cultures out there, people who do things a bit differently, whose practice isn't the same.

But these things don't immediately affect the gospel message and so Paul's prepared to make concession to them. He's even prepared to join in different ways of doing things. Chapter 9, verse 22 says, I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

See, modern day Paul, if he was working in a church in a city, he'd wear a suit and tie because that's the way they do things there. If modern day Paul had you around for dinner and you were a vegetarian, he wouldn't serve you meat because you don't eat it.

[14 : 35] You see, he doesn't insist on these matters because while love is very closely aligned with God's truth, it doesn't force unnecessary things on other people. It makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?

Once you start forcing cultural stuff on people, unnecessarily, there's going to be less inclination from them to want to hear the important stuff, the truth about God.

Love doesn't insist on its own way. Love isn't irritable. Love has a calm and even temperament. Love doesn't get wound up over trivial matters. Before Jesus comes back, there'll be lots of things wrong with our world, lots of broken things, lots of things that just go wrong all the time every day. There'll be big things, there'll be little things. There's a place for being angry at the brokenness, for not being happy with the way that the world is not yet fully healed. But there's no place for being frustrated and irritated at the pesky things that go on every day because love's not like that.

[15 : 44] Love isn't irritable. Not with things and particularly not with people. Love is not resentful.

A more literal rendering of the original language there might be, love does not reckon the evil or love keeps no record of wrong.

This is about forgiveness, isn't it? It's about not harbouring negative thoughts or feelings towards someone who's done something wrong to you. At one extreme this might be really hard.

If someone has done terrible wrong to you, if you've suffered awfully at the hands of someone else, it will be really hard not to be resentful. It'll take a lot of work for you to come to be not resentful.

On the other extreme, however, it leaves no excuse for Christians to bear petty grudges against one another. You know those petty little things that people have between each other?

[16 : 48] There's just no place for that in Christian love. Love is not resentful. Love doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing.

That is, love takes no pleasure in evil. Love doesn't laugh at the misfortunes of others. So much of what we see on television and our humour of our culture is all about other people's stuff-ups or other people's problems, other people's failings.

Love doesn't take pleasure in other people's misfortunes or in evil. One book I read said, a really common form of rejoicing in wrongdoing is gossip.

That's kind of, you know, when you can't wait to get together and speak up with someone else the problems of a person you know. No, love doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing.

In fact, it's exactly the opposite. Paul tells us, love rejoices in the truth. Love celebrates things that are good and true. Things that please God. Things that show his glory to the world.

[18 : 01] Things like the great news about Jesus who died for all of us. It's quite a long list we're working through, isn't it?

Love is no simple thing. Well, in verse 7 we have the last few qualities of love. Let's have a look at them. Love bears all things.

There's nothing that love can't face. There's no burden, pressure, or hardship that can break real Christian love. There's nothing that can be inflicted upon love to destroy it.

It continues, irrespective of what it faces. It bears all things. Love believes and hopes all things.

This isn't saying that love is naive or desperate, but it's saying love has ongoing trust and faithfulness. Love doesn't waver in belief and hope.

[19 : 05] This is a particularly overtly Christian thing about love, isn't it? Love with hope and belief, those three go together as the underlying virtues of the Christian faith, if you like.

You'll see Paul brings these up again to close this little discussion of love in verse 13. We'll come to that in a moment. Finally, love endures all things.

Real Christian love can't be exhausted or worn out, but keeps on loving, irrespective of the circumstances. It's a bit like patience, really, isn't it?

So we see as we come to the end, we've actually returned back to the top of our list. And as you think through this list in your own time again, you might like to get to the bottom and return to the top and keep thinking through love.

Love endures all things. It can't be exhausted or worn out. Now, I hope you see that what we've done is actually a very, very quick look at Christian love.

[20 : 13] And we probably could have had a sermon on every single one of those qualities. And it's probably well worth you thinking about it. We don't have the time to do that right now. I hope you will take this home and continue to think about what Christian love looks like.

Before I move on, I want to make a few more general reflections on what we learn about love in these few verses, four to seven here. First thing I want you to notice is this love that we've just dissected, if you like, this love that we've had described for us, this is not love as we often think of it, is it?

This isn't primarily to do with our thoughts or our feelings. This is far more about our character and the way we behave or the way we act in relationships with other people and on our own.

Some people say love is a doing word, love is a verb. And that's true, I think. Thoughts and feelings on their own can exist outside relationships. But we learn in 1 Corinthians 13 that love really has lots and lots to do with the way we interact with each other.

And it makes so much sense, doesn't it, when you remember that 1 Corinthians 13 comes between 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14, which is all about how we're going to share our gifts in the community of believers.

[21 : 34] We see that love is what we do as much as what we think or feel. There's nothing wrong with thinking or feeling. I've thought and felt a few things in my life. It's just that Christian love is not those things alone.

It's more than that. It's an active thing. It's the activity of Christian relationships. In the same vein, we notice that love is other person focused. Notice all those qualities of love are other person focused.

Really often, I think, in relationships, we think about what we get out of it, how we enjoy it, how it meets our needs, how it satisfies us. Even in good relationships, like marriages, you think, I love my wife because she makes me happy.

That's what I get out of it. Not, I love my wife by being patient and being kind and not being envious. It's, I love my wife because of how it makes me feel.

Now, that's a great thing. I want to hold that up. That's a fantastic thing. But remember, Christian love is more than that. Christian love is other person focused and not just about our thoughts and feelings.

[22 : 42] As I noted on the way through, love is a complex suite of qualities, isn't it? It's not just one or two things. It's not just that you can say, I'm patient, therefore I'm loving.

Or I'm kind, therefore I love. Or I'm not envious, therefore I'm a loving person. No, love is all of this at once. This is a complete package.

It's not a list to pick and choose how I'm going to love. All of these together are Christian love. And what this means is love is really hard to measure up to.

You see, I don't actually think anyone can fully measure up to this model of love. I read through this list and I just see time and time again how I fail.

I think, goodness me, these things I shouldn't do, I do, and these things I do, I shouldn't do. There are so many ways in which my love is lacking. Well, I suspect that's the true of everyone and it could be discouraging.

[23 : 54] But there's actually something very encouraging for us to think about in this letter. That is that it was originally written to a bunch of Christians who had a lot of problems. And this list of love, I think, is as much a rebuke to them as it is for me and maybe to you.

That is, Paul knows the Corinthians lack patience and kindness and they're envious and they're boastful. And he's writing this to pull them into line. But you know what? When you read the very start of this letter to the Corinthians, start of 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses those Corinthians by calling them sanctified, saints, brothers and sisters.

That's very encouraging because it shows that God understands his people won't be perfect and that while we need to pursue lives full of love, failing to get it right all the time doesn't actually make us failures in God's eyes.

You see, God's love for us isn't conditional on how well we love him or others. God's love for us is seen in Jesus. God's love for us is actually an amazing thing to think about after reflecting on what love looks like.

You think about these many qualities of love and you think, now what about God? Well, God the Father does love perfectly and he loves us perfectly.

[25 : 20] According to the Apostle John, God is love and although our love for God and our love for each other isn't perfect, God's love for us is.

Let me just flick to John, I'm reading 1 John chapter 4 verse 10, you needn't go there but write it down, 1 John 4, 10 and 11. This is what John says about love and God's love.

He says, in this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much we ought to love one another. God loves us first with a perfect love like 1 Corinthians 13, 4 to 7 perfectly and that's because of that we should aim to love one another.

We could think a lot more about God being love and God's love for us but that's not the primary thrust of what Paul's talking about here so that might be something else you can bring into your thinking about love later on.

[26 : 27] Now we need to move on and look at the final thing Paul says. In verses 1 to 3 we learnt that we must have love if our Christian fellowship is to be worth anything, if our gifts of service and ministry to one another has any value.

In the verses we've just looked at 4 to 7 we've just got a snapshot of what love looks like and now in verses 8 to 13 we learn that love never ends.

That's how it opens. Love never ends. And this helps us make a lot more sense of the rest of what we've been reading. You see although spiritual gifts that is gifts of service to one another although those gifts are from God and although they are very important and grateful Christian fellowship they're only temporary whereas love is eternal.

That's the big point of these verses. Spiritual gifts are what God has given us for dealing with this world before heaven in its brokenness and in its mess.

Let me read to you verses 8 to 10 but as for prophecies they'll come to an end as for tongues they will cease as for knowledge it as for knowledge it will come to an end for we know only in part and we prophesy only in part but when the complete comes the partial will come to an end.

[27 : 49] Spiritual gifts are what God has given us for now. They're great for now but they're only for now. You see you only need the gift of tongues when you can't audibly hear God's voice.

You only need good preaching when God's word is muted by the world. You only need gifts of healing when people are plagued with sickness. You only need ministers here until our great minister comes back and is with us.

You only need to serve others as long as others have needs. But in eternity in a new creation with God none of these gifts will be needed. You see God's voice will be crystal clear to us.

No one will be sick. No one will ever be in need because all the partial things will have passed. Gifts will be redundant because the common good will be fulfilled in the end.

Did you know that there won't be spiritual gifts in heaven? I hadn't really thought about that much until I came to look at this passage. No spiritual gifts in heaven. They're partial. They're passing. We won't need them.

[28 : 57] Our fellowship with one another will be complete. But love will be in heaven because love is eternal. Love's not one of the spiritual gifts. I think you'll see in your Bibles at the front of chapter 13 it says the gift of love.

That's not actually in the original version of the Bible. That's been put in there by the publishers to help us understand what we're up to. And I think that's a little bit of a mistake on their part because love isn't a gift.

Love is behind the gifts. Gifts will pass as temporary things but love is eternal. Love is the virtue that underlies the expression of all our gifts and love never ends.

And this is really why we need to be loving people because love lasts for eternity. Paul repeats this point for us in verses 11 and 12 with a couple of illustrations to help us just really catch it.

Verse 11 he says when I was a child I spoke like a child I thought like a child I reasoned like a child when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways. What he's doing here is comparing this life with spiritual gifts to children and children's thinking which is appropriate for the time but the next life in heaven is like being an adult and you won't need spiritual gifts there because they belong to this life.

[30 : 18] Difference between children and adults. Same point again in verse 12 for now we see in a mirror dimly but then we'll see face to face now I know only in part then I will know fully even as I've been fully known.

Our translation says we'll see in a mirror dimly but I think a better way to understand that is saying indirectly. It's not that you look in a mirror and you can't quite see it's that you see a reflection you see what you're looking at but only indirectly and that's what it's like now with spiritual gifts they're an indirect reflection of eternity but when eternity comes we'll have love and we'll see God face to face and the mirror will be redundant.

All of this is to underline for us once again how important love is. Love is one of the things that is going to endure into eternity and it has to underlie all of Christian living and all of Christian behaviour.

I trust you all have spiritual gifts here if you call Jesus Christ your Lord and Saviour and you have the Holy Spirit and you need to exercise these gifts amongst us but you need to do it with love otherwise it's not worth anything.

Paul concludes his lesson in love with verse 13 and now faith hope and love abide these three and the greatest of these is love. These are the great three Christian virtues right?

[31 : 50] They remain at the foundation of our lives. Christians I think tend to have a big focus on faith that's important to us. We probably don't think enough about hope but we should be recognising love as the greatest of these not a vague romantic kind of don't quite get it out there not when I see it I think love but real Christian love like we've learnt about in our chapter tonight and particularly in verses 4-7 you see although love hope and faith all remain now and continue now in eternity even faith and hope will end you won't need hope in eternity you won't need faith in eternity you'll be there but love endures Christian love is a very big thing to think about isn't it I feel like I'm only just starting to get my head around it it's a huge concept it's a huge thing that God loves us it's a huge thing that love is eternal it's a huge thing that we must live our lives together in love love and our chapter tonight leaves us with a challenge we need to think about how we love one another when I asked who do you love there were some great answers

God Jesus your spouse I hope you do love God Jesus and your spouse but we need to love one another you need to be able to look at everyone in this congregation and say I love them not to confuse that with a romantic view of love but say I love them that is I treat them like verses 4 to 7 say to treat people you love I love those people I'm patient with them I'm kind with them I'm not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude you see this chapter is challenging us to love one another we need to think about how we love each other and how we express the eternal qualities of love in our lives and our fellowships so I want to encourage you again take this list home or at least remember 1 Corinthians 13 and please think about it please think about it carefully please think about the way you love your brothers and sisters here at Holy Trinity please think about the way you love your brothers and sisters in the church throughout the world and then once you've thought about it do it love is a doing word it's no good if we come out of here understanding love but not loving sure understand it but then do it it will take time to get love right it'll take a lifetime but we need to be working at it all the time because it will last for all time let's keep growing then as a church that has a real and deep love for each other and let's ask

God to make it so that people say man Holy Trinity is a church where they really know how to love let's pray heavenly father forgive us our lack of love and give us love amen you have you you you