

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 AM

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[0 : 0 0] Let's bow our heads and pray just as we stand. Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden.

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts now by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Please be seated. And if you would take out 1 Corinthians 13 and turn to it in your Bibles, please, on page 959, that would be a great help.

1 Corinthians 13. This has to be one of the most searching passages in all the Bible. And I've been searched by it.

At first glance, it's very beautiful, and it's launched a thousand fridge magnets. But the more you take it out of context, the more toothless it becomes.

[1 : 0 5] And my guess is that you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone in Corinth who, on first reading, would say, oh, that was beautiful. I mean, here is a congregation that's competitive and divided and proud, status-seeking, selfish, fighting.

And almost every word in 1 Corinthians 13 is an indictment of their behaviour. Written out of deep love from the Apostle Paul.

And yet, these words would have been profoundly shocking, and they would have been mightily offended. Something we're very good at. But if we put it back in its context of the whole letter, the paragraph becomes more like a stethoscope by which Dr. Jesus listens to our hearts and finds out what's really going on.

So just cast your eyes. Look at the first paragraph, verses 1 to 3, for example. I mean, this is an astonishingly gifted church. But they especially loved the loudest, flashiest, brassiest gifts that drew attention to themselves.

They loved the gifts that had the dazzle factor and gave them room for boasting. And they had a particular love for speaking in tongues publicly. These are ecstatic languages that are not really human languages.

[2 : 3 0] They thought they were angelic languages. And the Apostle says to them in the first three verses, it's true, you're astonishingly gifted. But you can have the most flashy, arousing gatherings.

And you can have the best, most emotionally carried away church. But you know what it adds up to without love? Exactly nothing.

Worse, he says, it's no better than pagan worship, which I'll show in just a few minutes. Or take the second paragraph, you know, this list of qualities. But it's a beautiful list of beautiful qualities that are exactly what they're not doing.

Patient, kind, etc. I mean, take the one at the end of verse 7, love is not arrogant. We've met this word before. This is the word for puffed up, having a big head full of hot air.

And in 4.18, Paul said, some of you are arrogant. And in chapter 5, when he deals with their sexuality, he says, you are arrogant. And in chapter 8, he says, you claim to have all knowledge.

[3 : 38] But knowledge can puff up, make you arrogant, whereas love builds up. I mean, it's like, you know what it's like when there's a public announcement, there's a car alarm going in the parking lot, you suddenly realize it's yours?

That's what it would have been like, hearing this for the first time. Or take the third paragraph, 8 to 13. When I was a child, I acted like a child and I was very cute. But now that I'm adult, it's not very cute.

And Paul is saying, because there's a lack of love, which is the essential fruit of Christian growth, you're immature, you're acting childish. Or as he said in chapter 3, I wanted to talk to you as spiritual people, but I couldn't because you're still babies in the Christian life.

That's exactly where he began, chapter 12. So if you look back to the beginning of chapter 12, you remember he stops and he says, now I'm going to talk about your Christian gatherings. You see in chapter 12, verse 1, now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I don't want you to be uninformed.

And Aaron helpfully told us that the word gifts is not there. It's concerning spirituals. It's concerning what is truly spiritual in a gathering.

[4 : 53] How do you tell whether a gathering is truly spiritual? Then he says, verse 2, You know that when you are pagans, you are led astray, important word, to mute idols.

However, you are led, that's an emotion word. Therefore, I want you to understand that no one speaking in the spirit of God ever says Jesus is cursed. And no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

You see, the practice of pagan religion around about in Corinth was very exciting. Everything was calculated for the maximum ecstatic experience. So if you went to the temples, you could take drugs, you could drink a lot of alcohol, you could have an orgy with all sorts of different people, and you could dance and shout and go into a trance.

And the idea was that the more you got carried away, the more trance-like you became, the more you broke down the barrier between you and the gods and had an ecstatic experience of God.

That's exactly what Paul is speaking about in verse 2. You are led astray however you are led. And the word led literally means being carried away. That's what was spiritual in pagan religions.

[6 : 11] The more swept away you were, the more possessed you were, the more spiritual they said it was. And the Corinthians had become Christians out of these pagan temples, and they brought that lens into the Christian gathering.

And they say, the way you assess any spirit, any Christian gathering as spiritual, is how exciting it is. How carried away we are. How emotionally ecstatic.

Which just means Anglicans are sunk. But the apostle says, that's not the way, that's not the way of God's Holy Spirit.

The way of God's Holy Spirit, the test of whether the Spirit is really at work, is whether we confess Jesus Christ as Lord. And that's not just saying the words, Jesus created a parrot to say Jesus is Lord.

That means all of our lives are brought under the sovereign rule of the great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. That is the test of what it is, to be spiritual. Or as we went through chapter 12, when you meet other believers, if you want a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, you seek to build them up in their faith, he says in verse 7.

[7 : 21] You do everything to help others in their faith, because that comes from love, and love is the demonstration that Jesus Christ is Lord. See? It's quite bitey.

And that is why chapter 13 is where it is. We've just had chapter 12 on how God puts the body together. We're about to have in chapter 14 a great chapter on how we build each other up.

But the key, the key, the key is love. And the apostle makes three points about love. Number one, love is essential, verses 1 to 3.

Now, you might think at this stage, if you were the apostle Paul, you'd be tempted to say, ugh, you Corinthians, you are a pain in the neck.

I don't know why I bother, frankly. You are a perpetual headache with your selfish, childish, and unspiritual ways. I'm not even going to write to you anymore. That would be my temptation.

[8 : 20] Sorry, maybe that's not yours. But he doesn't take a stick and he doesn't scold them. Look what he does. He does the opposite. He comes beside them in verses 1 to 3.

He reminds them that what they're struggling with with regard to love is just as much his issue as it is theirs. And he shifts into the first person singular. If I speak, if I have, if I give away.

It's amazing. I mean, look at verse 1. If I speak in the tongue of men and angels but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. This is for charismatic churches.

Paul had the gift of tongues, which was mighty impressive to the Corinthians. He'd been to the third heaven, even more impressive. He'd heard things that can't be told to humans.

I mean, the apostle had the razzle-dazzle factor. And he knew the temptation to strut his stuff. But he says, without love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

[9 : 27] Now, that just rolls off us. But in the Corinthian context, that was deeply offensive. Because that is how people called pagans to worship. When you got to the temple, you used a gong to say to the god, gong, here I am, God.

Gong, come down now, God. Gong, listen to us, God. And Paul says, if I do all those exciting things without love, I am nothing.

Love is essential. Or look at verse 2. This will make us all a little more comfortable. This is likely a reformed evangelical church. If I have all prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and many PhDs, if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing.

We love knowledge, don't we? The only trouble is that knowledge can puff you up with pride. Whereas love works to build up other people. You can have all the knowledge in the world and you can use your knowledge without love.

And when we do, it's completely hollow. It's no help to anyone. And we ourselves are nothing. Love is essential. Or take verse 3. This is the social justice church.

[10 : 45] If I give away all I have, if I deliver up my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing. Spectacular generosity and deeds of goodness.

Giving away all you have. Anyone done that? Where's the treasurer? Sorry. Sacrificing your life to be martyred.

It's very searching. You can do those things without love. And it's an empty gesture. You can be in a ten year conflict with the diocese and stand for the gospel and lose your property.

But without love, it's nothing. Notice the apostle does not say that tongues or sacrifices are nothing. He says, if I do it without love, it is I who become nothing.

That's different. In other words, doing Christian stuff without love is a very dangerous exercise. It transforms me into something I wasn't before, something I don't want to be.

[11 : 57] I myself become hollow and empty and nothing. It diminishes me. If I do things without love, it leaves a permanent effect on me. Without love, the highest and best noise I can make leaves me empty and meaningless.

The best knowledge I have or the best sacrifice I make is nothing. But when we do use our gifts, we try to serve others and we do act in love towards those, we not only help them, but we become more of whom God has made us to be.

Isn't that an amazing thing? It's almost as though from these verses you could say, I love, therefore I am. My very existence and identity as a believer is part of belonging to the fellowship of the church and actively engaging in love.

I become more real as I love others. I grow into who I am as I love. The Holy Spirit makes me into more of a whole person as he does others whom I love at the same time as we give away ourselves in love.

Isn't that astonishing? And that's why Christian love is necessary, not just for others but for us ourselves. And if all my Christian life and serving is no real use to me apart from love, but Christian love makes me more than myself.

[13 : 22] It enlarges me. It takes me outside myself to care for others. It's through loving others I begin to escape from the dungeon of my own ego.

I become more alive as I give myself away, no matter how grumpy I'm feeling that day. It's as though love gives me substance and reality as a Christian.

So point number one the apostle makes is love is just as essential to Christian ministries as is the gospel. It's essential. Number two, love is seen in action.

Verses four to seven. This is a lovely shift. You notice in verse four, we go from I statements about Paul's own person to the person of love.

Love is patient, love is kind, as though love is a person. And he personifies love here in 15 separate ways. And they're all dynamic and they're all active.

[14 : 20] They're not about how you feel. Which is a great relief, isn't it? They're not about how you feel about other Christians or sentiments. Because Christian love has to be shown in action or it's nothing.

And each of these things put the others first. In the ancient Greek world, there are a whole raft of words for love. But there was one word that was very ancient that's only been used a couple of times before the coming of Jesus.

And Jesus grabbed onto that word and chose that word to express the highest form of love, God's love for us and our love for God. Agape, it's the Greek word. It's a selfless love that's passionately committed to the well-being of others.

It came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. It's the love that God shared, Father, Son and Holy Spirit with each other for eternity. It's always free. It's always lavish.

It's self-motivated. And that is the word that's used here in this chapter. This is this agape love. So verses 4 to 7 is not a hymn to love, but they're very particular practices right out of who God is in Jesus Christ.

[15 : 35] They come right out of the gospel. Take the first word, patient. Love is patient. It's literally long-suffering. Love has a long fuse.

The person who's patient is slow to anger. You don't explode in anger at the first slight. And do you know what this assumes? It assumes people will frustrate you and annoy you and do things that make you angry.

And you will frustrate people. You ever thought about that? That you and I can be a great annoyance and frustration and irritation to others in the body. That's why you can't learn patience on your own.

You can't learn patience if you only relate to those nice people who are friends of yours. This is the practice that only comes about by being exposed to irritating people.

By being infuriated with each other. Others who actually light your fuse. And this is just like God. He's slow to anger. He holds back his wrath, wanting more to come to the truth.

[16 : 46] Love is patient.

And it assumes that we will be wronged by brothers and sisters in the Christian congregation. And it assumes that we're going to need to do the work of forgiveness. Going to them and working with others.

And sometimes just bringing forgiveness with the other person. But to resent others means to keep accounts. To keep a track of all the times that you've been hurt or passed over or taken for granted.

And you add them to your list of grievances. And you keep a cumulative score of how many times you've been wronged. How you've served others and they haven't served you.

How your rights have been overlooked. And every now and again you have this delicious exercise of taking them out and looking at them. Because it makes you feel good about yourself.

[18 : 06] Even superior to others. Are you doing that? And you even wait secretly for payback and revenge. The thing about keeping a list of wrongs is it's great for my pride.

Because I'm the one who's being sinned against. I'm the victim. It's their fault. Always their fault. Their fault. Their fault. But when you go down that track God becomes distant.

Because the way God treats us is he does not treat us according to our sins. He doesn't reckon our sins against us. Love keeps no record of wrongs.

And I wish we had time to go through all of these to see how they work. A lovely illustration of the last one. Love bears all things. Because love carries all things recently. Andrew Buchanan who is the guy we support in Japan as a missionary.

Who was recently married to Konami. At his wedding one of Konami's friends gave testimony to the reality of Konami's love. This is a woman who is a Texan who lives in Japan and goes to Konami's church.

[19 : 17] She's tall and she has struggled with her weight. And she said that many, many Christians have come to her and talked to her about her weight. Always offering their most helpful advice and opinions on what she should do.

Which has always been unhelpful. And Konami said to her one day, you hug a lot of people. Does anyone hug you? It's a very interesting tack to take, isn't it?

So Konami, who's short, got up on the ledge of a car and gave her a big hug and then said to her, how do you feel about your weight? And this Texas woman said she began to feel it was time to close down this conversation and this relationship.

And then Konami said to her, why don't you come and live with me and we'll try and figure out how to cook healthy meals and how to eat well for a while. And she did. For a long time, years, and it has made all the difference.

Now, I think that's the perfect illustration of love because it took a risk for Konami. It wasn't advice. Konami put herself on the line there.

[20 : 26] It was costly. It was real love. And it meant real change for her friend. So love is essential, point one. Number two, love is seen in action.

And don't anyone come up to me afterwards and ask me if I want a hug. We have three perfect grandchildren.

And our five-year-old recently at an Easter gathering with, there are a bunch of adults there. And she decided she would give gifts just off her own initiative to each of us.

And she went over to each adult and she said to each of us in turn, I love you to the best of my ability. I thought that was pretty good.

So what's the third point? The third point is that love is eternal. Love is eternal. Verses 8 to 13.

[21 : 34] All the troubles in the church at Corinth are focused on life now. You know, the pushing and shoving and the rudeness in Holy Communion. I want to get there first. I want to get the best morsel.

Their disregard for each other and food offered to idols. Their rewriting of God's sexual standards. Their competitive spirit and fighting and dividing. Their love of their own abilities and gifts. They're all focused on life now.

And Paul says, our gifts will pass away. But verse 8, love never ends. It never ends. And the reason it never ends is because it is the power of the next life.

It's the power of the new age breaking into the present. It is the mark of the life of heaven. It's the mark of the life of God. It's the life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit that comes to us.

It's love what makes up the life of heaven. This is the way God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are with each other. And when we love now, we experience something of the life of heaven and we share that experience with others.

[22 : 41] Love never ends. Love never ends. It's so helpful, isn't it? Love never ends. Love never ends. I mean, it's possible to go through this list in verses 4 to 8 and feel like, I'm not measuring up.

And if you don't feel like that, you need to go back to the list, I think, a little more carefully. The point about this is they're not human virtues that we can work up.

He's not talking about ordinary garden kindness. It's not a personality type, oh, that person's very loving. Each of them, this whole gift of love is a supernatural endowment from God.

It is the love of God that has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. And what is unique about the God of the Bible is not that he is sometimes loving and sometimes mean, but that he reveals to us that he is love.

God is love. And that changes absolutely everything. This is love. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his son to die for our sins.

[23 : 53] It's not a vague love, a general love. You know, I love the mountains. It's very specific. God stepping into our place, sacrificing his life for us to bring the reality of his eternal life and salvation and his inner love so we can share it with each other.

And the great good news of the gospel is that none of us, none of us can love like that on our own. There's nothing I can do to make God accept me.

But out of the extravagance of the love with which he has loved us, he has accepted me. And as that begins to dawn on me and as hopefully it dawns on us day by day by day that God loves me specifically and expensively and eternally, it's possible to revolutionize me and make me want to love others as he does.

So you see, a Christian gathering and Christian congregations ought to be marked not by superficial politeness, how good we are at that, nor by people sticking with the group they like and are easy to love, but with people serving quietly, invisibly, praying on their way to church, Lord, how can I encourage and strengthen someone else today?

Who is sitting on their own? What can I say that can build up someone else's faith? Where are things weak? What can I do to strengthen them? In the late 200s and early 300s, one of the church fathers, Bishop Tertullian, wrote about the churches and he said, the pagans say about the churches that we don't believe what you believe, but you guys sure love each other well.

[25 : 36] You're able to die for each other. And I think it's helpful for me, just as I finish, to encourage you. You may be surprised to hear that this is exactly what I hear over and over and over about you as a congregation.

I hear people saying, we don't necessarily understand all you believe, but you love one another. The gospel is eternal, people are eternal, and love is eternal.

And so keep going, brothers and sisters. Faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love. Amen.