

Without Love

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- [0 : 0 0] with us today or whether they're watching us on YouTube. If you heard my children's address from yesterday, from last week in the evening, you will know that I am a fencer. I like to fence and I use swords.
- I'm sorry, I haven't brought the sword with me today. If you want to see that and you didn't catch it, you'll need to watch back. So I'm unarmed today. But I would like to talk a bit about a friend of mine.
- A friend of mine who is also a fencer and that's how I know him. Let's call him Tom. And we'll call him that because that's his name. I've known Tom since he was very young.
- I think he was about nine or ten when he first started fencing with us. I can't remember exactly, but he was very young. And Tom, Tom was not the most athletically gifted child I have ever come across.
- And this is me speaking. And my PE teachers would laugh at that. Tom could fall over his own feet walking the width of a room. But Tom really wanted to be a fencer.
- [1 : 0 9] And Tom particularly wanted to fence epi, which is the heaviest of the three weapons. And it probably weighed more than he did when he started. And it was longer than he was tall. But he really wanted to.
- So I started helping him to learn a little bit because that was my weapon. And to start with, I used to have to give him a ten-point head start to make it worth my while. But Tom was determined.
- And Tom trained hard. And soon, I was only giving him a five-point head start. Because otherwise, I was going to get an embarrassing thrashing. That wasn't enough for Tom.
- Tom kept training. And he kept pushing himself. And he kept training hard. And soon, Tom was entering competitions. And soon, Tom's name was appearing in the medal lists in competitions.
- School-level competitions and junior-level competitions first. But that wasn't enough for Tom. Tom wanted to be the best he could be. So he trained really, really hard.
- [2 : 1 1] And Tom has diabetes, so he had to watch his blood sugar. So that was another challenge. But he was determined. And he trained hard. And then when the Commonwealth Games were being held in Glasgow, Tom got an email to tell him that he had been selected to represent Scotland.
- This young lad, who couldn't walk the length of a room without falling over his own feet, had achieved such a level of skill in his sport that he was selected to represent Scotland.
- Now, at this stage, he was only just old enough to fence as a senior. So he went to the exotic far-flung location of Largs.
- And he came back with a medal. But that wasn't enough for Tom. And four years later, he was selected to represent his country again in Australia.
- And then Sports Scotland said, we're not funding fencing. And Tom had to raise his own airfare, his own accommodation costs, and his own training costs.

[3 : 23] And he did it. He worked really, really hard. He put a lot of effort in. He tried. He focused on what he wanted to do. And he made the effort. And he got there.

And he came back from Australia with another medal. And we at the club were all delighted for him. Now, why am I telling you this? I'm telling you this because we see here an example of someone who wants something, who works hard, who puts in the effort, and who gets it.

And that is almost exactly not what the gospel is like. Because the gospel tells us that there is something that we need and something we should desire and something we should want.

And it tells us that if we work hard and if we do our best, we still won't get there. Now, there are lots of things in life that you can achieve through hard work, and those are all good.

But for everlasting life, for life with God, and for rightness and fellowship with God, we cannot do that ourselves. But there is a way. Because Jesus has done the hard work for us.

[4 : 41] And that's what I want you to remember today. Jesus has done the work. All you have to do is trust him and follow him. A popular sports manufacturer, who I will not name, have a famous branding which says, just do it.

Well, our tagline today for this talk could be, Jesus has done it. All the effort, all the hard work, all the sacrifice, it's done for you.

All you have to do is lay hold of it. No effort. Jesus has done it. Let's pray now together in the words of the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[5 : 58] For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. We're going to read now from Scripture from 1 Corinthians chapter 13 in the New Testament.

We are continuing our short study of this chapter, 1 Corinthians chapter 13. It's on page 1155 if you have one of the church Bibles.

This is God's word and we pray that he would open it up to us as we read it. 1 Corinthians chapter 13. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have and if I deliver up my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing.

[7 : 19] Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.

It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away and as for tongues, they will cease.

As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways for now we see in a mirror dimly but then face to face.

[8 : 29] Now I know in part. Then I shall know fully even as I have been fully known. So now, faith, hope and love abide.

These three but the greatest of these is love. Verses 1 to 3 again. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing.

And if I give away all I have and if I deliver up my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing.

This is God's word. We pray that he would bless us, that he would speak to us through it as we study it now. I wonder if I was to ask you what's the one thing that you wouldn't want your church to be without?

[9 : 42] What would you say is the vital ingredient that makes a church a church? If we did a survey of churchgoers around the world or even just around our own nation I suspect that we would get quite an interesting range of answers to that question.

And partly that would depend on the traditions that they belong to or their backgrounds. But as we saw last week Paul had something to say about that to the church in Corinth.

And last week we looked at the context and the settings for 1 Corinthians chapter 13 and we saw that he was telling them that the missing ingredient in their church life was not the spiritual gifts that they craved but it was love.

And today what I would like to do as we look at this chapter and particularly the opening three verses is I want to consider what the passage has to say to us about what we as a church would be without love.

And as we look at that today I would like to consider it under two headings based on what Paul has said in these first three verses. Firstly I want to think about loveless gifts.

[11 : 15] loveless gifts. And then I want to go on to look at loveless service. So loveless gifts and loveless service.

Now if you take a look through the previous chapters the ones that precede this you can see that the church in Corinth was big on gifts.

And by that I don't mean that they were in the habit of giving presents to one another I mean spiritual gifts. What some would call the marks of the spirit.

Now in that way they probably had a lot in common with what we might consider the more charismatic elements of the modern church.

And when we looked last week we saw that the section from chapters 12 to 14 were very much about their attitude to spiritual gifts. It would appear that Paul's letter was at least in part a response to questions from them about spiritual gifts.

[12 : 30] And in the opening verses of chapter 12 we read Paul talking about the kind of gifts that they valued before he came to the end of that chapter and he promised as we saw to show them a more excellent way.

And in the opening verses of chapter 13 which follow directly on from that he considers what these gifts are worth without love. And we see there in verse one if we look at verse one he begins by saying if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Now it's not entirely clear what Paul means here by speaking with tongues. There are those today who argue that it was and still is about the use of supernatural tongues and that that's what he's referring to.

There are some however who would argue that the tongues of men simply refers to being gifted with the ability to speak other languages to communicate to people from other nations and the idea of the tongues of angels is just a kind of hyperbolic extension that even if he could speak in the tongues of angels and there are even those commentators who suggest it simply refers to eloquence to a gift for public speaking.

But in a lot of ways that's not what matters here and you can get lost in these arguments and I don't really want to do that because what matters is what Paul says about them.

[14 : 23] Now to the church in Corinth tongues whatever they were were seen as a highly desirable gift.

Everybody wanted this gift and they all it would appear strove to be the loudest to be heard to show off this gift gift.

But Paul says that it doesn't matter how gifted you are. You could speak with all the tongues of men or even with the tongues of angels but if you do so without love what?

You are a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Now those of you who have children who have ever had musical instruments can maybe appreciate how irritating that might be if you have a whole congregation of that.

And the word that we have translated here is gong in Greek is literally just bronze or any object made of bronze. bronze.

[15 : 50] Now bronze was something that Corinth was famous for. There would have been loads of bronze instruments in the city. They were really really common. And Paul says then that far from being special without love you are just another cheap noise.

if the point of tongues was to be heard then yes you would be. But just as part of a meaningless unpleasant cacophony.

and a lot of commentators also point to the fact that bronze instruments like these would probably have been very commonly used as part of the pagan worship in the city.

Something Paul's readers in the church in Corinth would have been very familiar with. So Paul was in effect saying that this supposedly superior spiritual gift was without love no better than the pointless babbling and clamouring and noise of the pagans who in Matthew's gospel in chapter 6 and verse 7 Jesus had described as heaping up empty phrases this idea of meaningless noise.

In fact in the original Greek there's a bit of a pun to drive this point home that we can miss in the English translations when Paul says if I talk the Greek word for talk is lalo I talk or I give voice and towards the end of that same verse where he talks about clanging a clanging symbol the word that we have translated as clanging is actually alalazon which is from the same root the same lalo root and it literally means untalking or voiceless it's a negation of that word of talking so if I give voice to the tongues of men and angels but without love I am a voiceless thing my voice is voiceless and I think that this is also Paul here referencing back to what he said in chapter 12 at verse 2 when he reminds the

[18 : 18] Corinthians that they had before becoming followers of Christ been led astray by mute idols literally voiceless idols he says that even if he himself is gifted with the most profound of tongues but speaks them without love then he is no better than the dumb idols that the Corinthians had been enthralled to previously well how does that speak to us here and now I think I can probably safely say that for most of us we are not much for speaking in tongues certainly not as it's often understood in the modern church today but what are the things that we consider to be markers of great spirituality great gifting what do we think are the big gifts the impressive gifts from

God God because the Bible tells us that no matter how impressive these things are if they aren't accompanied with love then they are just grandstanding and they are as meaningless as the most godless nonsense that we might see outside of the church and even actively opposing Christ and that was their big gift that was what they thought was important and after having dealt with that Paul goes on to speak about the giftings that he considers important look at verse two if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love I'm nothing now the phrase that we have in this translation as prophetic powers or in some translations just if

I prophesy it's got a much wider meaning than the popular idea of predicting the future prophecy is any kind of utterance made by humans from God it's when a human being speaks God's word the word of the Lord and it would include preaching or powerful witnessing anything which we might consider a word from the Lord now that's something we can maybe relate to a bit more we all love to hear the word preached well or shared well or spoken well don't we and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that it has a purpose but Paul makes it very very clear that even that even exemplary preaching even bringing the word even that without love is nothing now that really flies in the face of this kind of growing culture of celebrity preachers doesn't it all these people who we all think are really somebody because of their gifts well the

Bible says that without love all these somebodies are nobody don't get me wrong here I am not saying there is anything intrinsically wrong with a preacher or a speaker or a writer just because they are popular I personally have had a great deal of benefit from popular preachers and popular writers from listening and reading to many of them but it is their love for God and their love for their brothers and sisters and their love for the lost that makes their gifting valuable and worthwhile if they don't have that love nothing and if we focus on their gifts more than we do on love for God we make idols of them and the same goes for the other gifts

Paul talks about in this verse deep understanding great knowledge faith so powerful it can move mountains what believer wouldn't want those things I mean that last one has got to be Paul deliberately echoing Jesus' words as we have them recorded in Mark's gospel in chapter 11 where Jesus says truly I say to you whoever says to this mountain be taken up and thrown into the sea and does not doubt in his heart but believes what he says will come to pass it will be done for him are these things not the pinnacle of faith are these not the things we should be striving for as believers marks of great belief well no because while they are all good things and while they are all desirable things

[24 : 16] Paul says that they are not the high point in fact without love they are meaningless they are nothing can you imagine just for a moment how shocking that would have been to the Corinthians all the things they esteemed so highly all the things they prized that they squabbled over about which was best and who had most and Paul says that they are nothing without love now if telling them at the end of chapter 12 that he had something more excellent than these gifts hadn't been shocking enough then telling them that they were worthless without it must have come as quite a sharp reality check what about us though what are the things that we place similar importance on what are the gifts that we value most highly and that we seek to emulate and that we chase after if Paul was writing this letter not to

Corinth but to us what would he list bible knowledge preaching skills clear thinking and good teaching ability good singing voice presenting skills gift from multicultural ministry or youth work doctrinal orthodoxy gravitas and dignity now none of them are bad things and all of them can be gifts from God to be used in his work but just like the gifts in the church in Corinth and the gifts that they were chasing without love they are nothing they are meaningless they are noise okay so if it isn't about my gifts then how about what I give maybe it's it's not so much about what you've got as what you do with it that brings us on to our second point loveless service let's take a look at what it says in verse 3 if I give away all

I have and if I deliver up my body to be burned but I have not love I gain nothing now that's pretty full on if people were hoping that their service their willingness to give of themselves their willingness to sacrifice if they were hoping that might be valued as worthwhile then Paul puts paid to that notion it doesn't matter how much you give it doesn't matter how much you are willing to sacrifice or how far you are prepared to go you can give away everything you have you can be willing to be used up completely and even die a horrible death in doing so but without love it's useless it's profitless it is of no value stop and think about that for a minute it seems pretty harsh doesn't it that someone could do all this and it still counts as meaningless

I mean the world is always encouraging us to be looking to do more isn't it to achieve more to work harder to work smarter just do it put the effort in I mean what's what's one of the first questions that most people are going to ask when they meet someone new in a social situation obviously after we've worked out who their people are what do you do what do you do because so often in this world we are trained to think that we are defined by what we do if we do good things we are good people but God doesn't ask us what we can do for him he asks us if we love him think about

Jesus meeting with his disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee after he's been raised from the dead you can read about that account in John chapter 21 and if you're reading that from verse 15 onwards Jesus is confronting I think is the best word confronting Simon Peter who had denied him three times and had deserted him straight after promising that he would never do that so what does Jesus say to Simon Peter does he ask Peter are you sorry does he ask him how are you going to put this right does he ask him what are you going to do now no not once but three times he asks him do you love me that is what it takes for Peter to be reinstated to be welcomed back to be shown that he is still one of

[30 : 55] Jesus' disciples not a performance review not an action plan of some kind not restorative justice service not service at all but love do you love me well do you because it is possible to give generously to work hard to burn ourselves out and use ourselves up without love and from the outside that might look like a great example of faithful living but it's not it's possible to do all this and more because we think we should maybe because we want to be seen doing these things maybe we like the idea that people will see us doing these things and will think well of us but maybe it's not even that cynical maybe we do it out of a sense of duty a cold kindness motivated by obligation and a desire to do the right thing whether anyone sees it or not but Paul says that without love that is pointless in

John's first epistle in chapter 4 in verse 8 he writes whoever does not love does not know God because God is love whoever does not love does not know God that is pretty solemn right there is no room in there for hard hearted orthodox obligation and dull duty no room at all that might well cause us to do all the same things and maybe even to do them well but it is not about what we do without love that is nothing profitless noise and from the outside the end result might look very similar and the

Corinthians problem was not that they did all these things it was that they valued the outward signs too highly and they chased after them instead of putting love first and asking God to help them love each other and him what about us what about you and none of this none of this is to say that God doesn't have tasks for us or that he doesn't gift us accordingly when Jesus spoke to Peter there on the lakeside he had a job for him and he would certainly exhibit the spirit's gifts in his ministry from then on but first and foremost what was needed was love Paul himself had many gifts and he would spend himself totally in service to the

Lord love but what would make that worthwhile was love where there is love action will follow but without love all the action in the world is meaningless do you have that love because Jesus asks us each of us just as he asked Peter on that shore do you love me how do you answer that question are your good works and your spiritual gifts the result of the out flowing of a loving heart or are they worthless wordless noise clattering clamoring symbols and if you aren't following

Jesus if your hope isn't based on love for him where is it it is in your gifts is it in your acts of kindness your good deeds your good living your charitable works because at the end of the day all of these will be as nothing if you do not have the love of Jesus in your heart God so we need to ask him all of us all of us we need to ask him prayerfully and sincerely to help us to be a people known for our love a people whose actions are shaped and driven by our love and who place the highest value on love first.

[37 : 04] 1 John 4 reminds us that love comes from God and then it goes on to say in verses 11 and 12, Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. So we need to ask God to make himself known to us and fill our hearts with that love.

If we want the world outside to come to know God, to want to know God, how does 1 John tell us that they will come to know him? They can't see him, but they can see us.

And when they see his love working in us, then they get a glimpse of him. That's how we witness. Because when it all comes down to it, that is what Jesus will ultimately be asking each one of us.

Whether you're trusting in him now or whether you're not, sooner or later, the question will come down to that. Attending meetings, feeding the poor, serving the church, preaching the word, all good things.

[38 : 46] But what he wants to know, what he asks you, what he will ask you then and what he is asking you right now, do you love me?

Well, do you? Do you? Let's bow our heads in prayer. Lord God, we ask that as we consider these words and as we think about what you are saying to us through them, that you would help us not just to be doing your will from obligation, not just to be fulfilling a duty, but Lord, to be filled with love, to recognize the love that you have for us and that you have poured out for us through the sacrifice of your son, that we would be filled with that love and it would change us and it would shape us and we would be so filled with it that it flows out of us and that it influences and affects every single thing we do and all our interactions with other people and that when that happens, we would be a community bound together in love and the world outside us would want to be part of that as we show our love for them which is a reflection of your love for them and your love for us.

Make us a people who love and help us to respond to that question. Yes, Lord, I love you. Make that our cry, we pray.

In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. We are going to close our service now by singing again, this time from the Scottish Psalter.

The Scottish Psalter, Psalm 139. Psalm 139. Psalm 139 of the Scottish Psalter which you'll find on page 432 if you have one of the church Psalm books.

[41 : 10] And this Psalm reminds us that God knows our hearts. There is no hiding from God. So if we want to be known as a people who love, we have to ask him to make that so.

But just as there is no hiding from God, there is nowhere we can be hidden from him. He is always with us. He always sees us. Whatever we're going through, he is with us. We're going to sing from verse 1 to verse 10.

O Lord, thou hast me searched and known. Thou knowest my sitting down and rising up. Yea, all my thoughts afar to thee are known. We're going to sing this Psalm to God's praise.

Amen. O Lord, O Lord, thou hast me searched and known.

Thou knowest my sitting down and rising up.

[42 : 18] Yea, all my thoughts afar to thee are known.

My footsteps and my lying down, Thou compassedst away.

Thou also most entirely art Acquaint with all my way.

For in my tongue Before I speak Not any word can be But all together, O Lord, It is well known to thee Behind before thou hath beset, And laid on me Thine hand Such knowledge is

Too strange for me Too high to understand From thy spirit From thy spirit Whither shall I go Or from thy presence fly Ascend thy hand Lo, Lo, thou thou art there There, There, If in hell I lie Take high the morning wings And dwell in the utmost part of sea

[45 : 19] And dwell in the utmost part of sea In there, Lord, Lord, Shall thy hand me lead Thy right and hold Shall me And just as usual, After the benedict If you could take your seats And just wait to be shown out And maintain suitable social distancing As we are still required to For the time being Let's close Lord God, We ask now that as we go from here We would know your blessing We would know your grace, Your peace, Your fellowship And your love In our hearts From Father, Son and Spirit, One God In Jesus' name we ask Amen Amen