

All You Need is Love

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Preacher: David Court

[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to that passage in 1 Corinthians 13 that we read together a little earlier just before we come to look at this let's pray together. God our Father we thank you for your word that is true and trustworthy and reliable and we pray that as we open that word tonight that your Holy Spirit would be our teacher and that your glory would be our chief concern. We ask it through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Many many years ago when I was in school in secondary school I had a geography teacher whose name or rather I will not disclose his name but his nickname was Gruff. And he wasn't a particularly good teacher I have to be said although I ended up going on at University study geography which was his subject. He was an unusual guy because he was someone who made astounding claims for himself and when I went to school and an impressionable 12 year old he appeared quite an amazing person. Stories of his feats and exploits that he shared with us in the in the classroom were quite literally beyond belief. He would tell of his childhood trip to Canada where he learned to ride bareback where he met Chief Sitting Bull's son on an Indian reservation and they became blood brothers. His academic abilities were such that he achieved 12 hires by the end of his fourth year at school. He climbed the Matterhorn with Chris Bonnington driven with Emerson Fittipaldi people of a certain village might remember who he was trained with the SAS and was of course an accomplished martial arts expert. There was nothing he had not done no person of stature he had not met no field of human endeavor at which it appeared he did not excel. He presented himself as a cross between James Bond, Dr. Kildare again you have to be a privileged to know who Dr. Kildare was and John Wayne and as one grew up through school one's perception as you might imagine of gruff changed. It was long before we began to realize that all his tales of derring do were simply the product of an over fertile boy's own imagination far from being a kind of heroic figure he was rather quite a sad and pathetic figure. Looking back it's clear that all his great stories all his great claims revealed a pathetic immaturity more a Walter Mittie than James Bond stories could have been written by the brothers Grimm. A huge gap you see existed between what he what and who he claimed to be and what he and who he was in reality. Massive he was a secondary school geography teacher in Lanarkshire. He wasn't James Bond. He wasn't a world renowned racing driver, mountain climber, blood brother of chief sitting bulls son or whatever and that kind of credibility gap when we see it in children perhaps we can be kind of cute you know it's a kind of mark of childhood pretending to be someone or something that we're not but but in adults of course it's not cute at all. What's perceived as being funny in our children is more likely or not to be seen as something strange unusual ugly almost in adults a mark of gross and pathetic immaturity. Now why am I talking about

Gruff? Well I think to understand one Corinthians and to understand this chapter of one Corinthians you have to understand that it was immaturity that was the ugly reality in the Corinthian church. Immaturity lay at the heart of many of the problems of this church and there were a lot of problems if you go away and you read through one Corinthians you'll discover a church that has a lot of problems. A friend of mine did a series on this he called it Christians behaving badly that was a good title for it. It was a church in which the people many of them thought that they were spiritual and mature and important they thought they had arrived and yet Paul as he speaks to them says it's a delusion and a pretty pathetic one at that. We don't have time to look in detail through the letter but already in the letter Paul has accused the Corinthians of being worldly in chapter 3 he talks about them being infants in Christ. In the next chapter to this one in chapter 14 he exhorts them to stop thinking like children in your thinking be adults. What he's talking about of course he wants them to grow up. We want our churches to grow not just numerically but spiritually we want people to grow up into the Lord Jesus Christ. He was and it was a very lively confident vibrant church but it needed to grow up. Instead of these Christians displaying the marks of an adult and grown-up faith actually they were behaving like immature and spoiled children and really to understand this 13th chapter you have to understand it in that context because if you don't understand that then you miss the point of the passage because it's such a well-known passage isn't it? Such a well-loved passage. A beautiful description of love. Some have called it you know the hymn to love. One commentator calls it the greatest strongest deepest thing that Paul ever wrote but and this may as come as news to some people Paul did not write one Corinthians 13 for a marriage ceremony because actually what he's doing here is he's tearing a strip off the Corinthians. He's challenging them about their attitudes and behavior in the strongest way possible. It isn't actually a cozy feel-good passage although it's often presented as such. It's Paul giving the Corinthian church a spiritual rocket. He's putting a bomb underneath them. He wasn't writing this chapter so that the Corinthians would say, ah Paul what a marvelous piece of literature. He was writing so that the Corinthians would recognize how complacent they had become and so that they would repent of their wrong and their sinful attitudes. He was trying to burst the bubble as it were of their superiority.

And what Paul is saying here to the Corinthians and to us is that love is the hallmark of Christian maturity. It is as he puts it the most excellent way.

And without this kind of love we are simply deluding ourselves as to the nature of our relationship with God. The chapter is three major paragraphs. Each one tells us something about the nature of love and its fundamental importance for a Christian community that wants to grow up into Christ. And the first paragraph is from verses one to three and in that paragraph Paul tells us that love is indispensable. That's what he's trying to say here. Love is absolutely indispensable. He's saying that there is nothing as crucial or as important than the presence of love. It's the vital ingredient. If we don't have love we don't have anything. And what Paul is doing is he's contrasting on the one hand gifts and on the other love. The Corinthians you see the Corinthian church laid a great store on its gifts, giftedness. They viewed the gifts as being the real mark of maturity and true spirituality. And Paul is saying look you've got it all wrong. It's not the gifts that are indispensable. It's love. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol he says. Now the gift of tongues was greatly valued in the Corinthian congregation just as it is by many people today. It was a gift that Paul himself appears to have exercised and the Corinthian saw this gift as a real mark of spiritual maturity. Just as many people see that today. It was believed to be worship of angelic or heavenly origin. Their attitude could be summed up in the phrase now these three remain faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is tongues. And Paul tells them no he says that gift is empty if love is not present. No it could be tongues but it could be something else. It could be our doctrine, our ethics, our traditions. Maybe very important, maybe very significant. But if we have these things without love they're empty. The gong and the symbol were instruments that were used in pagan worship often to drive away spirits or maybe to attract a

[11 : 18] God's attention. So what Paul is saying here is despite all their claims to being really spiritual and mature, despite the revelation of certain gifts, the absence of love meant that the Corinthians were no better than pagans.

And that's an important message for us because without love the church is no more than a pagan temple. It's empty religion. He says if I have the gift of prophecy can fathom all mysteries all knowledge for faith have a faith that can move mountains but have not love I'm nothing. Paul moves away from speaking about the gifts that the Corinthian church highlighted and adored and he speaks of the great gifts of God that he himself enjoyed as an apostle. Gifts that marked him out as some the significant and important and the special. Prophecy, knowledge, miracles, what wonderful gifts. But Paul says these things are not comparable with love. No matter the marvelous gifts we enjoy without love it's nothing. We can have degrees after our name we can be academically brilliant we can have a miracle working faith but the absence of love means that we're a nobody. Supernatural gifts may make us a somebody in the eyes of others but in reality the absence of love makes us a nobody. He says if I give all I possess to the poor surrender my body to the flames but have not love I gain nothing.

Here Paul speaks about the gifts if I could put it this way that the world admires. Sacrificial giving for the benefit of others and yet such noble actions can be motivated sometimes by something less than love. People can give for a whole variety of reasons for personal kudos and fame to be thought well of by others. Another to gain something for themselves by way of reward. But without love present there is no gain or benefits as Paul. As a story told I think it's like most of these stories they go back to Spurgeon I think he did to the gets the gets the blame of all of these kind of illustrations but anyway this story of the rich Duke who are a gardener. The gardener loved his master out of his love and devotion he decided to give him this prize carrot that had been cultivating all year. This beautiful master he presented the

Duke with a carrot out of love and the Duke was touched by the sincerity of the man's devotion really appreciated the gift he saw that it come from a heart of love and so in return he gifted the gardener a beautiful valuable horse from his stables. There was another man nobleman and he saw this strange transaction taking place and he calculated well if you got a horse for a carrot well if you bought something really big then who knows what you might get in return and he brought a rare valuable tree that he was going to gift to the Duke and the Duke discerned the man's heart thanked him for his gift and walked away leaving the nobleman being used and confused. The Duke turned back to face the nobleman and said friend you gave yourself the sapling you did it for yourself not for me. Paul says here that if we give only for ourselves then such an action amounts to nothing as it were on Helvins balance sheet and that's why sometimes it's possible for people to appear very good very devoted friends generous kind giving and yet in reality they're doing it all for themselves actually they're using people not loving them for who they are. They love and give as long as they're getting. As long as they're getting what they want. Maybe admiration maybe affection maybe obedience maybe whatever but if you cross them if they don't get what they want then your history. We know from some of

Paul's other writings that he understood that love was the product of an authentic work of God in someone's life. The evidence of the Spirit's work in Colossians 1. The hallmark of Christian authenticity. Love is described as the mark of maturity in the faith. Paul Peter rather says add to your faith love. It's the very opposite of an immature egocentricity because it's giving like God gives. Paul says without it we're nothing and we all need that kind of love in our lives. We need to open our hearts to God and to his love. Not close them.

[17 : 01] See as Lewis once said if you don't want your heart broken then give it to nobody lock it up in a little casket of selfishness and in that casket it will not be broken. It will become unbreakable impenetrable irredeemable. Friends we need to open our hearts to the love of God in Jesus Christ because it can happen even in churches. People who are so gifted but unable really to love anyone but themselves. Paul says it's not your gifts, it's not your talents, it's not your abilities that really matter. It's love. Love is indispensable.

Secondly here love is indescribable in verses 4 through 7. What is this love look like? What is it when you put when you sketch it? What does it look like? And I suppose what Paul does here in these verses he tries to describe the indescribable. He describes love in terms of what it does and does not do. He says this is the way of maturity in the Christian life. This is what this love looks like in practice. This is how you know it's real. He tells us what love is.

He says it's patient, long-suffering. Whatever it faces love doesn't lose its temper. Human nature isn't it that we are so often patient and understanding with ourselves but much less so with others. Love is patient. Love is kind. It cares more for others than for self. It's generous. Love is not puffed up he says.

Not proud. Not envious. Doesn't boast. The message Eugene Peterson's translation says love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut. Love doesn't have a swollen head. Actually when you read through Corinthians you discover that was a major problem for the Corinthian church. Paul says in chapter 4, 18 and 19 some of you have become arrogant. In chapter 5 he says you're proud. In chapter 8 he tells them that the knowledge puffs up but love builds up. And what it tells us is that very quickly pride and jealousy can flourish in the human heart and in the life of any church. It's interesting that Paul says yeah love is patient and kind but then the rest of the descriptions that he gives are negative descriptions. Love is not. You know we hear today that love is accepting and inclusive. That's not the way that love is described in the Bible. Paul says to Titus the grace of God teaches us to say no to ungodliness. Love is not puffed up or proud. It's not rude he says or unseemly. The Greek word there means to ride roughshod over someone to take advantage of them, to bulldoze them, to steamroller them, to take no notice of their feelings. Love is not rude. Love is not self-seeking he says. Paul earlier in the letter says nobody should seek his own good but the good of others. Chapter 10 verse 24 love isn't always me first and sometimes it's easy in church in the Lord's service to seek position and influence and status for our glory rather than God's. The Christian mystics and

John of the Cross once wrote this all visions, revelations, heavenly feelings and whatever experiences greater than these are not worth the least act of humility. For acts of humility are the fruit of that agape love which neither values nor seeks itself which thinks well not of self but of others. Love is not self-seeking. Love is not easily angered he says. It isn't touchy. It's not easily provoked. It has a long fuse. You know I've been in churches where some people should wear a sign. Around their necks danger, high explosive. Love keeps no record of wrongs. It wipes the slate clean, it forgives, doesn't go around casting up people's mistakes, doesn't treasure grievances or bear grudges, doesn't think the worst of others and is always impugning their motives behind their actions. Keeps no record of wrongs. Doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It's not anything goes. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. This is the way of love. Remember years ago at church we had a girl who was working as a Christian out in China and she came to share with us and just when she came back she would come and visit with us and share with us about her experience, about her involvement there and you know she was building relationships with people and sharing the gospel, teaching English and there was a lady that had been sent by the government to spy on her and after a number of months this lady confessed and she said look I've been sent by the government to spy on you but I can't do that because I now have the love of Jesus in my heart and because I love you. Love always protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres. As Paul's description unfolds it's clear isn't it? There's only one model that he could have used and that's Jesus Christ himself. He alone is the one through whom we can come to know this divine supernatural love because this love looks like Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God. He's the word made flesh and love is the revelation of God's character that we discover and encounter only in Jesus Christ. The Corinthians were gifted but they were graceless. They thought they were mature and spiritual but they were children. They were spoiled. How did that happen? It happened because we lost sight of Jesus Christ and that can happen in any church, can happen in any family, it can happen anywhere when we lose sight of Jesus and that's why we meet together.

[24 : 17] That's why we gather around the Lord's table. That's why we open the scriptures together because we don't want to lose sight of Jesus.

That was indestructible, indescribable, indestructible in verses 8 through 13.

Quickly here in closing, the final verses are contrast, the gifts that they were exercising in Corinth. They thought were proof of God's favor, the mature faith. They thought these gifts were really the marks of heavenly blessing.

Their emphasis was in the wrong place. Chapter 4, Paul alludes to this when he says, already you have what you want, already you've become rich. It's if that the Corinthians believed they had arrived and Paul saying, look you haven't arrived. The mark of heaven isn't these gifts heavenly as they may appear. The mark of heaven that we're to experience now is love. Love is the language of heaven, not tongues. Those gifts, whatever they are, they're temporary.

They're not lasting, they're not permanent. They will not endure, they will pass away. It will all pass away, but love will not pass away. The American Theologian, Jonathan Edwards says, heaven will be a world of love. And so in verse 11, when Paul writes, 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. That's not an allergy simply or an illustration. It's Paul saying, look I want you to grow up.

[26 : 09] Follow the way of love. Now these three remain faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.

God doesn't have faith or hope. If he did, he wouldn't be God. But if God didn't love, he wouldn't be God. Love is the essential activity of God himself, the father, the son, the spirit. And it's in this sense that love is the greatest of gifts, because it's the essence of love that we're turned away from ourselves towards others. That's what God has done for us in the gospel. And beyond anything else, that is that kind of love that's able to build up a Christian community.

It's able to mature us as human beings. Where do we find love like this? I use this illustration often, but I suppose my people excuse me. It's the question that sometimes a husband is asked by his wife. Those of you who are married, this will maybe resonate with you. That's when the wife says, do you love me?

That's the question. Do you love me? And you say, when that question is asked, the alarm bells go off. Because the answer is, of course, yes darling, of course I love you. But of course it's not quite as simple as that guy, is it? Then comes the second question. It's the real one. Why do you love me? Well, there's a lot of answers to that question. I love you because you've got a fantastic figure, because you're rich, because you're a fantastic cook, because you're prettier than I am handsome, you know, whatever. There's lots of things you can say there, isn't there? But actually there's only one answer upon which you can build a marriage. And that is, I love you because I love you. Because if you're loved because of this or that or the other, all that it does is breed an incredible sense of insecurity. The person is simply left wondering, am I still pretty, rich, patient enough? As human beings our hearts long for a love that will liberate us and set us free. We long to hear those words, I love you because I love you.

That's God's love. That's his electing love that the Bible speaks about. He loves us because he loves us. Not because of who we are, but despite who we are, despite the fact that he knows everything about us, it's a powerful love. It can change you and transform you from the inside out. It's a love that can build confidence. Because to know that we are the object of God's amazing love is the most liberating and wonderful thing we can know. That's the love we encounter in Jesus Christ. That's the love that builds relationships and strengthens churches and matures disciples. Do you know that love in your own life? Not God's love is some kind of vague, general thing for everyone. God's love for you has this love overpowered you, overwhelmed you. Is it the fundamental reality that undergirds your whole life? Without it we have nothing. With it we have everything. If you don't know anything of this love, then come and surrender your life to Jesus Christ. Look to the cross and hear the words. This is how much I love you. Instead of James Tenney, preacher of a bygone generation in Scotland, the only time he envied the Roman Catholic priest, his crucifix, was when he wanted to take it and shake it in people's faces and say, God loves you like that. God loves you like that.

[31 : 22] Jesus became unlovely on the cross. That we might be loved and be made lovely in God's sight. If you're a Christian, as I suspect the majority of us are here tonight, are we growing up? Are we leaving behind childish ways? And are we growing up into Christ? Are we growing in love? It's the essential ingredient and we can only receive it from Jesus Christ because only he can say to us, I love you because I love you. Let's pray.

Father forgive us when we fail in so many ways, when we are puffed up, or immature, when we think more of ourselves than we ought. Father forgive us our many sins and bring us again to Jesus Christ, the one who is the source of all good things and the source of your love for us. Lord may your love overwhelm us and indwell us and change us and transform us. Make us different. That we may reflect your love in our lives and in our community together. That you may receive all the glory and all the honour and all the praise. Amen.