

The Way of Love

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Preacher: David Court

- [0:00] I'm going to read from God's Word now the passage that David is shortly going to come and preach to us from. 1 Corinthians chapter 13, those first 13 verses.
- The words are going to be on the screen. The words are in your bulletin if you've got one at the front door. There's also a collection of Bibles at the back. If you'd like to have a Bible for the reading or to refer to during the sermon, please get up and get one at any time.
- This is 1 Corinthians chapter 13, verses 1. To 13. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
- And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and I have all 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. Love is patient and kind.
- [1:03] Love does not envy or boast. It's not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It's 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.
- 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 love 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.
- Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide.
- [2:06] These three. But the greatest of these is love. Amen. And this is God's own holy word. Well, in our morning worship, we've been working our way through the Old Testament book of Daniel.
- And Corey has been leading us through that. This morning we're taking a little break from that series. And as a standalone sermon this morning, we're looking at this very famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13.
- One of the most famous and perhaps well-known passages in all of Scripture. Arguably the most well-known of Paul's writings. Some have called it the hymn to love.
- One commentator calls it the greatest, strongest, deepest thing that Paul ever wrote. But 1 Corinthians 13 is not sentimental poetry.
- It's the Word of God, sharp as a two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit. Here is Paul holding up a mirror to the Corinthian church so that they might examine themselves and change their ways.
- [3:23] Because, of course, Paul did not write these famous words of 1 Corinthians 13 for a wedding ceremony. Or for them to be quoted in a hallmark greeting card.

The words of the apostle here are not to be wrenched out of the context in which we find them. And we discover these verses sandwiched between two chapters in which Paul deals with a contentious issue in the Corinthian church over the use or abuse of spiritual gifts.

One of the problems in the Corinthian church was the way in which so much emphasis was placed on certain gifts of the Holy Spirit.

We're told in 1 Corinthians 1 verse 7, Paul says that the Corinthians lacked no spiritual gift. When it came to gifts. When it came to gifts, this was a church that had them all.

A church ablaze with the charismata. They spoke in tongues. They prophesied. They healed. They worked miracles. These dramatic, supernatural gifts of the apostolic age were greatly valued and esteemed in Corinth.

[4 : 44] And yet at the same time, the Corinthian church was also a church riddled with division, factions, pride, selfishness, and moral failure.

Many had started to prize their gifts above all and everything else. And these wrong attitudes had in fact left the church in a sad and sorry state.

And so, what we have here in 1 Corinthians 13 is not a cozy, feel-good passage of Scripture, although often it's presented as such.

But rather, Paul giving the Corinthian church a searing critique of their behavior and conduct. Paul wasn't writing to the Corinthians so that they would say, Well, Paul, what a marvelous piece of literature.

So that they would have lots of warm, fuzzy feelings. He was writing so that the Corinthians would recognize just how far they had fallen.

[5 : 46] Just how complacent they had become. And just how immature they really were. He was writing these verses to burst the bubble of their spiritual pride and superiority.

Because here was a church guilty of misusing and abusing the good gifts of God. And at the close of chapter 12, a chapter that speaks about the spiritual gifts and their use, Paul says this, chapter 12, verse 31.

He says this, And the language that Paul uses there is very emphatic. He says, Here is something far more wonderful.

Here is something far greater. Here is something you really need to take note of. Here is something that puts all these gifts, wonderful as they are in the shade.

Here is the more excellent way. And that is the way of love. And what Paul is saying here to the Corinthians, and indeed to us, is that love is the hallmark of Christian maturity.

[7 : 04] It is the most excellent way. And without it, we are deluding ourselves about the nature of our relationship with God.

We may have gifts aplenty. We may have great theological knowledge. We may have had wonderful spiritual experiences. And yet, for all those things, we can be missing out on what is the most important thing.

And the chapter, you'll notice there, as Chris read it for us, has three main paragraphs, each one telling us something about the nature of love and its fundamental importance for any Christian community that is seeking to grow up into Christ.

And the first paragraph that we look at is in verses 1 through 3, and we'll entitle this, The Priority of Love. The thrust of these opening verses of the chapter is that there is nothing as crucial or as important as the presence of love.

Love is the vital ingredient without which we have and are nothing. And Paul really contrasts in these verses the gifts on the one hand with love on the other.

[8 : 27] The Corinthians laid great store on these gifts. They viewed these gifts as being the real mark of maturity and true spirituality.

And what Paul is telling them is that in that they have got it all wrong. It's not gifts that are the priority. It is love. Gifts without love are useless.

And you'll notice in these verses how Paul homes in on the kind of things that the Corinthians believed were important. And he begins in verse 1 with tongues.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. The gift of tongues was greatly valued in the Corinthian congregation, just as it is by many and some sections of the church today.

It was a gift that Paul himself exercised. And the Corinthians saw this gift as a great mark of spiritual well-being and maturity.

[9 : 36] Some believed it to be a language of angelic or heavenly origin. And yet Paul tells them here that such a gift is empty if love is not present.

The gong, the cymbal, were instruments commonly used in pagan worship as, you know, to drive away spirits or to attract a God's attention.

And the clanging of bronze at these temples would have been a very familiar sound in the city of Corinth. Despite their great claims to spiritual maturity and the elevation of these spiritual gifts, the absence of love, Paul says, means that the Corinthians were no better than the pagans.

Without love, the church is little more than a pagan temple. And then he says, if I have prophetic powers, verse 2, understand all mysteries, all knowledge, if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

And here Paul speaks of the great gifts of God that he himself had enjoyed as an apostle, gifts that marked him out as being someday important and special, prophecy, knowledge, miracles, wonderful apostolic gifts.

[10 : 55] And yet even so, even these 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, yet even so, the absence of love means we're nothing, says Paul.

Supernatural gifts may make us a somebody in the eyes of the world, but the absence of love makes us a nobody. And Paul says, if I give away all I have, verse 3, deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Here Paul speaks of gifts that the world admires, sacrificial giving for the benefit of others, and yet even such noble actions can be motivated by something less than love.

People can give for a whole variety of reasons, personal kudos and fame, to be thought well of by others, to gain something for themselves by way of reward.

But without love being present, Paul says there is simply no gain or benefit. Last Sunday night, Corey told a story, a famous story, first told by Charles Spurgeon in one of his sermons.

[12 : 20] I've been guilty of stealing Corey's stories and illustrations before, so I'll continue in that vein by telling it again.

This is the story of the king, the farmer, and the nobleman. And this is how the story goes. Once upon a time, there was a king who ruled over everything in the land.

And one day, there was a gardener who grew, this is a strange story, an enormous carrot. And he took it to the king, and he said, my lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown, or ever will grow.

And so, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you. Well, the king was touched by this man's actions. He discerned the man's heart.

And as the man turned to go, the king said, wait, you're clearly a good steward of the earth, and I want to give you a plot of land to you, freely as a gift, so you can garden it all.

[13:21] The gardener was amazed and delighted at this generous gift, and he went home rejoicing. But, there was a nobleman at the king's court who overheard all of this.

And he reasoned, he said, well, my, if that's what you get for a carrot, what if you gave the king something better? And the next day, the nobleman came before the king, and he was leading a handsome black stallion.

He bowed low, he said, my lord, I breed horses. This is the greatest horse I've ever bred, or ever will. Therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.

The king discerned this man's heart, and he said to him, thank you. And he took the horse and simply dismissed the man. And the nobleman was confused and perplexed.

And so, the king said to him, let me explain. That gardener was giving me the carrot that you were giving yourself. The horse. And Paul says here, if we give only for ourselves, then such an action amounts to nothing on heaven's balance sheet.

[14:39] And it is possible, friends, for some people to be generous and kind and giving and to appear that way, and yet in reality, they're doing it all for themselves.

actually using people rather than loving people. They love and they give, but only if they're getting. Admiration, obedience, affection.

And if they're crossed or don't get what they want, your history. Friends, we know from Paul's writings that he understood love to be a product of an authentic work of God in someone's life.

It's an evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit. It's a hallmark of Christian authenticity. Peter, 2 Peter 1 says this, add to your faith love.

It's a mark of maturity. It's the opposite of immature egocentricity because it's giving like God gets. And we desperately need this kind of love in our own lives, in our own families, in our churches, and indeed in our wider society.

[15:59] C.S. Lewis in his little book *The Four Loves* wrote this, if you don't want your heart broken, 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. And friends, it can happen. People who are so gifted, so knowledgeable, so able, but so unable to really love anyone else but themselves.

Paul says it's not our gifts, our talents, our abilities that really matter. It's love, the priority of love. It brings me to the second thing here from verses four through seven.

And we'll call this the power of love. If love is more important than the gifts, then secondly, love is more powerful than the gifts. And Paul tells us something here, I think, in these verses about the power of love.

love. Many different words in Greek to describe different kinds of love, that between a man and a woman, a parent and a child, between friends and so forth.

[17:14] But the word that Paul uses here is the word *agape*. It was rarely used before the writing of the New Testament. But it's a word that the apostles took to describe Christian love.

And it relates to love for the unlovely, love for the unworthy, love for those who are different, love for the sinner, love for the guilty, love for the lost. And what Paul endeavors to do here, I think, in these verses is to sketch for us a portrait of love's power.

He describes or depicts love not in terms of, you'll notice, feelings or emotions, but rather in terms of what it does and does not do. In the original language, there are verbs everywhere here, doing words, words of action.

Love is active. Here is the way of maturity. This is what love looks like. This is how you know it's the real thing. Look at what he says. Love is patient or long-suffering.

Whatever it faces, love does not lose its temper. Human nature means that we are often patient and understanding with ourselves, but much less so with others.

- [18:24] Love is kind. It cares more for others than for self. It's generous. It has an open hand. Love does not end envy or boast. It's not puffed up. It's not proud.

Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase, the message says, love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut. Love doesn't have a swollen head.

Actually, all through this letter, we detect that was actually, that was a major problem for the childish Corinthians. Corinthians. Chapter 4, verse 18, Paul says, some of you become arrogant.

Later, he says in chapter 5, verse 2, you're proud. Chapter 8, he tells them, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Love is not arrogant or rude.

The Greek word literally means to ride roughshod over someone, to take advantage of them, to bulldoze, to steamroller them, to take no notice of their feelings.

- [19:27] Love does not insist on its own way. It's not self-seeking. Paul has already told the Corinthians in chapter 10, verse 24, nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

Love is always me first. And it's easy, even in, even in God's service, to seek position and influence and status for our own glory rather than God's.

The Christian mystics in John of the Cross once wrote these words, all visions, revelations, heavenly feelings, 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 irritable or resentful. It's not easily angered. It isn't touchy. Love is not easily provoked. Love is a long fuse.

- [20:29] I've been in churches where, you know, some Christians should be wearing a sign around their necks, danger, high explosive. Love keeps no record of wrongs.

It wipes the slate clean. It forgives. It doesn't go around casting up people's mistakes. It doesn't treasure grievances, bearing grudges.

It doesn't think the worst of others, always impugning their motives or the motives behind their actions. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. It rejoices with the truth.

Love is not anything goes. That's sometimes what we hear in our wider culture. Sometimes people paint a contrast between the right thing and the loving thing, but friends, the right thing is the loving thing.

And the loving thing is always the right thing. Love is never, ever to be an excuse for sin and evil and immorality. Then he says, love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

- [21:34] It's indestructible. It's powerful. Many years ago, we had a lady that we prayed for who was served overseas in China.

And when she was there, the authorities sent a woman to spy on her, to get close to her and to report back to them.

And eventually, after a few months, this lady who'd been sent from the government spoke to our friend and said, confessed.

And she said, look, I can't report on you because the love that you've shown me, the love that you've displayed, I love you too much.

As Paul's description proceeds, surely it's clear to us that there is only one human model he could have used for this portrait. And that's our Lord Jesus Christ.

[22:44] He is the, alone is the one through whom we can come to know this kind of love. Love looks like Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God, the Word made flesh.

Love is the revelation of God's character that we discover and encounter in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Corinthians were gifted, but they were graceless. They thought they were so spiritual and mature, but they were children.

They were spoiled brats. They'd lost sight of Jesus. Friends, let's not elevate our gifts at the expense of love. What does it matter about our gifts if we cannot get on with each other, if we can't forgive one another, if we can't serve one another in love?

Because this is what matters to God. Not miracles and signs and wonders. Love. May not be as showy, but it's more important. You can have great gifts and you can be a devil.

Just think of those words at the end of the, towards the close of the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus. On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name, do many mighty works in your name?

[24:00] And I will declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. The priority of love. The power of love.

And then thirdly and finally here in verses 8 through 13, the permanence of love. In these final words of the chapter, Paul really lifts up our eyes to the eternal horizon.

He says, love never ends. As for prophecies, verse 8, they will pass away. For tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. Love alone will last. The gifts will fade.

They will disappear. They will go. Prophecies, they'll pass away. Tongues will fall silent. Knowledge will be consumed in the vastness of eternity. Only love will remain.

For we know in part, verse 9, we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. Perfection is coming, says Paul.

[25:00] A new creation will dawn in all its fullness and it will swallow up everything that is partial and temporal and ephemeral. The perfect that is still to come is, I think here, almost certainly a reference to the return of Jesus Christ.

Yes, there are some who argue that this perfection relates to the completion of the Scriptures after which the supernatural gifts died away. And while I agree with the view that these more spectacular gifts were used by God in the early days of the church to authenticate the gospel, they were given for a temporary purpose while the New Testament was being written and compiled, I do not think that this text relates to that.

Paul is simply making the point that spiritual gifts, supernatural or otherwise, belong to this present age and not the age to come.

Love alone will endure. Love alone will last. Love alone will stand. Gifts of teaching, mercy, helping, administration, all of these are provisional.

Yes, they're needed now, but they're not going to be needed in the new heavens and earth. In the new creation, there will be no need for patience and forgiveness or faith or hope, but love will continue.

[26:18] The mark of heaven that we experience now is love. Love is the language of heaven, not tongues or any other gifts. These things are temporary. They are not lasting.

They won't endure. They will pass away. Jonathan Edwards wrote, heaven will be a world of love. So, Paul says in verse 11, 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. And I think that verse is more than just an analogy or an illustration. This theme of childish immaturity runs like a thread throughout the whole letter.

And already, Paul has accused the Corinthians of being worldly, mere infants in Christ in chapter 3. In the next chapter, chapter 14, verse 20, he exhorts them to stop thinking like children and you're thinking be adults.

Sometimes, with young children, we have a couple of young grandsons, and you discover that they're more interested in the cardboard box and the wrapping paper than the present that's contained within it.

[27:34] And that's fine, isn't it, with toddlers? It's cute. It's funny. But if you were to see a 17-year-old discarding the games console and climbing inside a cardboard box, you might think there was something seriously wrong.

And spiritually speaking, this is what the Corinthians were like. They should have grown up and been mature, but instead, they were clinging to childish ways. It's a danger. Maybe there's, maybe somebody here, you need to climb out of the cardboard box of your selfishness and your immaturity and leave it behind in your thinking.

Be adults. For now we see in a mirror dimly, then face to face, verse 12, now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I've been fully known.

Corinth was a city famous for metal work, and that included the manufacture of, there were kind of bronze mirrors. And these mirrors, nothing like as clear and as accurate as those we have today.

In those mirrors, you only saw a poor reflection. Seeing someone face to face was very different. And in this present age, we see the face of Jesus Christ, yes, reflected in His creation and in the Scriptures.

[28:50] But a day is coming when we will have no need of those mirrors that reflect His glory, for we will meet Him and see Him face to face. There's an old hymn we sometimes sang, Face to face with Christ my Savior, face to face what will it be, when with rapture I behold Him, Jesus Christ, who died for me.

Our knowledge of God here is always partial and incomplete, but a day is coming when all will be revealed. As we ourselves are known and loved by God, so we will know and love Him.

We shall see Him face to face, we will know Him as He is, and our knowledge of Him will be so much greater and more wonderful. Now these three remain, verse 13, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love.

And yes, faith and hope are important in this world, but love is in a category of its own, because love is a property of God Himself in a way in which faith and hope are not.

God doesn't need faith or hope. If He did, He wouldn't be God. But if God didn't love, He wouldn't be God. And it's in this sense that love is the greatest of gifts, because the essence of love is that we are turned away from ourselves towards others, towards God.

[30:19] and beyond anything else that can build up any Christian community in harmony and unity and maturity is love.

Maybe it's good to look at ourselves. Are we like the Corinthians of old, in danger of becoming noisy gongs, clanging cymbals, gifted but loveless?

Do we prize our knowledge, our zeal, our service, our preaching, while our hearts are cold and indifferent? Maybe we should be praying, Lord, help me to be more loving, because this is what's important.

This is the most excellent way. And no matter who you are this morning, young or old, gifted or not, big or small, strong or weak, no matter who you are, if you are in Jesus Christ, you can be great in love.

We need to be committed to loving one another. By this shall all men know that you're my disciples, said Jesus. It's the real test of our discipleship, because church is not a gathering for the gifted.

[31 : 31] It's a community of compassion and care. That difficult brother, that annoying sister, that person who gets on your nerves, they are your calling as God's children.

Love them. Be patient with them. Forgive them. Bear with them. And do that not in your own strength, but in the power of the Holy Spirit, who in His grace, God pours His love into our hearts.

The final thing I'm going to say just as we close, be looking to Jesus Christ, because He's the one who embodies this love. He was patient with His slow-witted disciples.

He was kind to the outcast and sinner. He was compassionate to the lost, forgiving towards His enemies. For sinners, He endured the cross, despising its shame. And if you want to know what love looks like, look there.

Look to Jesus. Look to His cross. Look to Calvary. Look to the blood and the nails, because it's there that we see that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. It's there that we see that His mercies never come to an end.

[32 : 38] There's a question that sometimes, on occasions, it's usually the wife's wife will ask this question of her husband rather than the other way around.

But the question is this, do you love me? Well, the answer to that question, of course, is yes, darling.

Of course I do. But if you answer in that way, you're not going to get off that easy, because there's always a follow-up. And the follow-up is the why do you love me question.

Why do you love me? Lots of possible answers you can give to that. I love you because of your beauty, because you're, you've lost some money, because we've got similar interests, because you're a great cook, because you're much prettier than I am handsome.

You know, there's lots of things you can say. But friends, there's only one answer upon which you can build a marriage. And that's, I love you because I love you.

[33 : 50] I love you because I love you. Because if you're loved because of this, that, and the other, all that does is breed an incredible insecurity. And the other person is left wondering, are they still pretty enough, rich enough, patient enough?

We long as human beings for a love that liberates. We long to be really loved. And this is God's love in Jesus Christ. This is His electing love.

This is what Christ says to us in the gospel. He says, I love you because I love you. He loves us and invites us whoever we are to come to Him in faith. And it's a powerful love.

It will transform you. Being united to Jesus will change you. This is the love that converts sinners, that builds relationships, that strengthens churches, that matures disciples.

It is the essential ingredient in that process of growing as a Christian. we learn and grow not as we fixate on ourselves, our own gifts and abilities.

[34 : 59] We learn and grow as we reflect and rejoice in the amazing love of God for us in Jesus Christ. It's in being joined to Jesus that we draw from Him all that we need to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And it's only as Jesus and His love overwhelms us and indwells us that we can even begin to think of loving like this. It's the love that we see at the cross.

Look there and see how much He loves you. The Scottish preacher James Denny used to say that the only time He envied the Roman Catholic priest His crucifix was when He wanted to shake it in people's faces and say God loves you like that.

It's only as we look to the cross in faith that we receive from Christ that wonderful assurance that can change us and transform us because it's there at Calvary He tells sinners I love you because I love you.

Let's pray together. Almighty God we are weak and frail human beings.

[36 : 20] We falter and fail in so many different ways especially in this whole realm of love. Lord would you be pleased in your mercy to pour out your love into our hearts by your Holy Spirit that we may be transformed and changed that you might conform us to the image of your Son that we might be more like him.

Lord forgive us restore us renew us and refresh us by your Spirit by your love love that you might receive all the glory honour and praise in Jesus name Amen Amen.