

# **“Essential and eternal love”**

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

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1 Corinthians 13:1-13

There's only one Bible passage which is equally popular at weddings and funerals - the beautiful chapter on love in first Corinthians 13.

It's read at weddings of course, because its listing of the qualities of love provides a great reminder to a bride and groom of the commitment they are making to each other - "love is patient and kind, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, rejoices in the truth" and so on. And it's read at funerals because it speaks of the eternal nature of love, that love never ends, it tells us that while the nature of life beyond death is a mystery, we can be sure it is characterised by love, God's love, our love, love eternally.

But when the apostle Paul wrote these beautiful poetic lines, he had no idea they'd end up being used in Christian services of marriage and funeral more than 1900 years later. His purpose in writing them was quite different. He wrote them to ram home in no uncertain manner to the Christians in the church at Corinth that their attitudes and their behaviour were wrong and completely unacceptable, to show them how they should be living out their faith in God and to call them to repent and mend their ways.

The church in Corinth was riddled with disunity, competitiveness, self-righteousness, spiritual arrogance. They were so diverse they didn't really hold together. They consisted of Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor and slaves. Their differences of opinion on issues like sexual morality, the eating of meat dedicated to idols, how to celebrate the Lord's Supper, speaking in tongues, the Holy Spirit, the resurrection and eternal life had degenerated into factionalism, some claiming they were following Paul, others Peter, others Apollos. Some of the rich people brought copious picnic meals for communion and consumed to the point of drunkenness, while the poor were left with not enough to eat. Some claimed they had the true spiritual gifts from God - wisdom, prophecy, speaking in tongues, miraculous healing - and they looked down on other church members whom they saw as having none of these.

So in chapter 12 Paul states very firmly that we need each other in the church, we need the diversity of gifts, everyone who believes in Jesus has a place in the church no matter their background, their social status, no matter what gifts they have received from God.. Moreover, he declares that every Christian has received at least one spiritual gift from God - and that we need to live together honouring everyone, for there are many members yet only one body of Christ.

Then he works his way into his chapter on love by saying "and now I will show you a still more excellent way". Love counts for everything, love counts more than speaking in tongues, more than powers of prophecy, more than knowledge and wisdom and more even than faith, more than acts of flamboyant generosity or self-sacrifice which may be motivated not by love but to draw attention to oneself. Paul is not denigrating any of those gifts, he's not belittling the importance of wisdom or faith or miracles or philanthropy - but he is saying that love outranks in importance all else, that love is essential - "if I do not have love, I am nothing". If church members are not living with

this depth of love - for God, for their fellow members of the church, and towards others - then they are not true Christians at all.

The model par excellence of love is of course Jesus. Jesus performed miracles but he didn't want people to believe in him because of them. Jesus presented the love of God to all, especially to those who were the most unloved in their society, those who were deemed to be cursed, like lepers; those who were deemed to be immoral, like prostitutes and tax-collectors; those who were deemed to be lacking in religion, like peasants and fishermen; those who were deemed to be second-class citizens, like women and children. Jesus lived this humble self-giving love of God, for all. And note it's not a weak love, not a doormat love, not a love that accepts injustice or wrong. This love speaks truth, names evil, castigates self-righteousness and greed, faces opposition with peaceful dignity never taking a backward step, accepts suffering and even death, for the sake of love. Jesus' love has extraordinary integrity.

This is the depth of love Paul brings to the notice of the Corinthians. In the last verses of the chapter Paul speaks of the eternal nature of love. In effect, Paul is acknowledging that we human beings, while we can will ourselves to be loving in attitude and action, will find it impossible to maintain Jesus' standards of love --- unless we tune ourselves into receiving God's love, unless we can draw on reserves of love which come from outside of ourselves. The love, forgiveness and compassion which God has for us, and which we can and will receive if we can just open ourselves to God even through the smallest sliver of an opening in our hearts and minds, can become for us a daily source of love which we can then share with others. The greatest Christian lovers down through the centuries - people like St Francis of Assisi, William Wilberforce, William Booth, Mother Teresa - have always been people who take the time to tune into God's love and guidance for them; they are people of prayer, people of worship and praise, people of study, spiritual people.

So next time you hear 1 Corinthians 13 read at a wedding or a funeral, nod your head to yourself acknowledging its appropriateness - but also remind yourself that this great chapter on love is Paul's ultimate advice to Christians who were wrong, who failed to see that love is essential and eternal, that love counts more than anything else when it comes to living as the people of God.

And if ever we are tempted to compare ourselves to other Christians, thinking we are better than them; or to judge other people as somehow less worthy than ourselves, then read again first Corinthians 13 and remind yourself that love counts far more than anything else when it comes to living as the people of God.

To the glory of God, Amen.