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**'For God so Loved the World' – Part 8**

*'Without love it's all nothing!'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The giving and receiving of love lies at the very foundation of our lives and if we are to become truly successful in life we need to learn how to receive love and how to give love. We can pursue success and fulfilment in any other area of life - but if we miss out on being loved by God and others and returning that love to God and others - then we will have missed the whole reason for being created.

Today I want to draw your attention to that beautiful hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul's famous ode to love is well known and it's often read at weddings. Any passage on love is appropriate to read at a wedding - including this one. However, to see this passage only in that context is to miss the whole point which Paul wanted to make when he wrote these powerful words. If you read this whole letter to the Christians at Corinth you will see Paul is scolding these believers because of their silly, air-head spiritual ways. In that context what he then effectively says in chapter 13 is: *"You can look and sound spiritual and do all sorts of things in Jesus' name - but without love - it's all nothing!"*

So this beautiful passage was actually a stern correction to abuse and sinful behaviour in the Church and a strong reminder that love must lie at the heart of any God-honouring ministry or life. The presence or absence of love is the ultimate test of authenticity in the Church. So if this passage is going to have any relevance for us we first need to hear it and experience it in its original context.

The Corinthian believers had elevated one spiritual gift above the others. That gift was speaking in tongues and they had effectively made this one spiritual gift the mark of true spirituality and they were certainly not the last Christians to make that mistake. In doing this, they had neglected and even downplayed common decency, courtesy, servility and genuine, selfless love. These believers got the idea that if they had any kind of spiritual experience then it was good, and if it was weird and out of the ordinary – then even better! But they were way off the track here and Paul needed to warn them.

Paul clearly says in a number of places in this letter to the Church that just being spiritual; just having a spiritual experience and even exercising a true spiritual gift is not necessarily a good thing. If that gift is not exercised in a way that is helpful to people; if it's not edifying to people, then we are not operating in love. Paul doesn't downplay the gifts themselves - he just stresses that love must be the vehicle in which those gifts travel within the Body of Christ and out into the community around us.

So the key to knowing how to act in a Church community is whether it helps people. Are people loved or encouraged or blessed or edified or built up as a result of that ministry? In Paul's mind, spirituality boils down to something very basic and it's something that we all need to understand, appreciate and be reminded of often. God's love must be the fuel in our tanks, the grease on our axles and our spiritual GPS. That is the essence of what Paul is saying in this very beautiful, but quite confronting chapter.

Being religious or spiritual does not impress God. He doesn't care for organised religion. He doesn't care about the survival of a particular ministry. What God is really concerned about is that people are helped and that His love is flowing through us to everyone around us and that is the only business God is in - because God is love.

So when we exercise the gifts God has imparted to the Church in the context of love; when we channel them into helping people then, and only then, are they valid in a ministry context. Paul's first letter to the Corinthian believers was written to correct them and to guide them out of their spiritual silliness and immaturity where people were not being loved, helped or respected. Therefore, today we must be reminded that 1 Corinthians 13 is more than a beautiful description of love – it's actually a confronting challenge to us all and, if needed, a sobering rebuke. It should force us to look at our behaviour and the exercising of our gifts so we can ensure that the wonderful qualities of love, as given to us by God, are manifested in the way we live and act inside and outside the Church. So let's just look at the first few verses of this reading:

*“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” (1 Cor. 13:1-3)*

Now Paul intentionally starts by talking about tongues and prophecy because these were two of the gifts which were being abused in the Corinthian church. If we read on into chapter 14 of this letter he deals with this abuse in detail. But his point here is simple: if the way you operate as believers is not lovingly focused on those unbelievers whom you desire to see come to Christ, then you have missed the mark. Paul says that when unbelievers come into our gatherings and see and hear things they simply cannot understand or relate to in any way, then it will do them no good whatsoever - it will probably guarantee that you never see some of them again. Unless someone has been able to explain what is happening and turn something which appears weird into something edifying for all, then they will not be helped by that. Therefore, Paul says, don't do it!

Now of course there will always be some things that need explanation and there will be those things which are spiritually discerned once those people are enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Generally speaking, however, the unbeliever should be able to get a grasp on what's happening fairly quickly in a way that makes sense to them and is a blessing to them and leads them towards God, rather than drive them away in confusion or fear and in some cases – just pure boredom!

That's one of the reasons why I try to preach as simply and as clearly as I can and I have received positive feedback from many outside the Church to my teaching over the years which is encouraging and continues to keep me as grounded as possible in the way I present the gospel. I hope I will always preach that way and I hope the Church will always minister that way.

That doesn't mean God can't manifest His presence in ways that none of us understand - it just means that as far as it depends on us - we should ensure that there is a simple, clear proclamation of who we are, Whose we are and why we are here – demonstrated by what we say, what we do and how we live and all of that is lubricated, saturated and motivated by love.

So it would seem that the Corinthians had lost sight of this. Paul doesn't criticise them for speaking in tongues. He doesn't infer that it wasn't a genuine spiritual gift. He simply says that they were exercising this gift in a way that God never intended and so it was not helpful and therefore not loving - and if it's not done in love, then it amounts to nothing. We need to get the strength of this. Paul says that a genuine spiritual gift from God, if it's being exercised in a way that does not help anyone - if it's done without love - then it's absolutely worthless. That's a very strong, but really important statement. **Love is always more important than religious activity.** Love is always more important than abstract spirituality. People are more important than ministry programs.

You can see this throughout the whole ministry of Jesus. He demonstrated this truth every day He was among us. Probably the most exquisite examples were when Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. Every time He healed someone on the Sabbath, the religious people were there ready to tell Him, *"You can't do that, Jesus. That's not spiritual. That's not right. Haven't you read the Old Testament where it says not to work on the Sabbath?"* Well, of course Jesus knew the Old Testament better than any of these amateurs and so He told them in word and in deed that people are more important than their skewed interpretation of the law. Love always triumphs over religion.

Jesus always put people and their real needs ahead of spirituality or religious practices. So our spiritual activities might be good - they might even be supernatural in the sense that we normally use that word, but they all amount to nothing if people are not cared for; if they are not served in some way; if they are not truly loved. Then Paul goes on to explain what this loving and self-giving and helpfulness actually looks like and these are the verses we remember so well – and rightly so.

*"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away."* (1 Cor. 13:4-8)

Notice that these statements are all relational in nature. Love serves the real needs of people. Now in contrast with the modern feeling of love which is that it's only a feeling, just an emotion, the New Testament would not understand that concept of love. That's why for us today in our culture it's hard to read in the English translation the word 'love' and even begin to know what it means because our frame of reference for that word has shifted a long way from Paul's frame of reference. Love for us in our culture is often a warm mushy feeling we have. In this passage love is still a feeling – but it's also an act of our will - it's a verb – it's something that we do. People see our love in action ... or not.

These Corinthians thought they were a cut above the average because they had some pretty flashy supernatural gifts in operation. But Paul cuts them down to size in verse 8 when he says,

*"... where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away."*

They were boasting that they had it all and Paul was telling them they had nothing! This must have been quite a shock to these believers. Paul was pointing out the selfish attitudes of some people in that Church who were hell-bent on getting everything for themselves. Paul says love is patient and kind and you are not – and that effectively renders you a big spiritual zero. So you can see why I get a little uneasy reading this passage at wedding ceremonies - when I understand it's original context. It's a hard word of rebuke and warning and it's also a very necessary word for today.

Now I could preach through this love chapter word for word as I have done many times over the year but I won't be doing that this time. It really is self-explanatory. It's the clearest language you will find in the whole New Testament and once we understand the central point that Paul is trying to make - the whole chapter rings with clarity and power. We are then forced to look in the mirror and ask some hard questions as we evaluate our lives, our ministries and the whole Church in this nation against this foundational benchmark of love. However, when we look at this standard and see our shortcomings we shouldn't rate ourselves or others. This is not meant to induce guilt or judgement. We are 100% accepted in Christ, regardless of our performance. It is on the basis of Christ's perfect performance that we are accepted. We can't do anything good enough to get more accepted by God and we can't do anything bad enough to get less accepted by God.

Our acceptance is complete in Christ and in Christ there is no condemnation. Having said that, our daily lives are transformed when we identify and address our shortcomings and, in that process, our effectiveness as ministers of the Gospel is greatly enhanced. So if we can look at these lofty ideals in 1 Corinthians 13 honestly and allow some honest self-assessment and healthy repentance to flow - we can grow in a beautiful way. Better still, we also get to read this passage as a glorious promise of where we are headed and who we are becoming in Christ. The New Testament tells us that God is love and in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul gives us a long description of what love looks like and acts like, thereby giving us one of the most accurate and beautiful descriptions of the God we serve.

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Now can you see why God is the perfect person to live with? How would you like to be married to someone like that? Wouldn't that be great? Well that is who God is. For many people in our world that comes as a surprise because they may have grown up with an understanding of God that is different to that. But regardless of how you *feel* about God; regardless of how unhappy you *think* He might be with you, I can assure you on the authority of Scripture and personal experience over my whole life that God is all of the above and more.

Wouldn't it be nice if you were married to someone who never remembered what you did wrong the day before? Think about that for a moment. Well the fact of the matter is, you are married to such a person. Every one of you who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ has entered into an intimate relationship - potentially more intimate than any marriage relationship - with God Himself - this God who keeps no record of wrongs.

Think how the Church would look if today, if right now, we all stopped keeping a record of each other's wrongs. What would the Church look like if we all wiped the slate clean and looked at tomorrow, not yesterday, in all our relationships? My mind cannot conceive the glory of such a thing. But that is how God operates every day with each one of us and we miss it because we don't believe the truth of Who God is, or because we're too busy recording everybody else's wrongs or dwelling on our own failures, so we don't have time to bask in God's accepting, forgiving, empowering love. The word in the Greek behind that phrase in verse 5 is the same term used to refer to bookkeeping. Literally translated it means: *Love does not compile statistics of wrong - love does not keep score.*

Some people still believe that they are going wake up one cold morning in heaven and for a while they are going to wish they hadn't because their whole life is going to be played out on some big screen before them. All of their sins - all of those things done in secret - all up there for everyone to see. I was actually taught that in Sunday School. One of my children was told that in a devotions one morning by her teacher at a Christian School. That is not the truth (and my daughter stood up in class and told the teacher he was wrong). It says so right here. Love keeps no record of wrongs and God is love. How much clearer can we make it?

In Hebrews 8:12 we read that in the new covenant - in New Testament Christianity God says, *“I will remember their sins no more!”* You cannot get any clearer than that. When God says, *“Forget it,”* that's exactly what He means! There is no permanent record to be used against us later and what that means is that since God doesn't hold it against us, we can off-load the guilt and the shame and start fresh every day. We don't need to live with the aggravation and pain and humiliation of the sins we have committed in the past - God keeps no record of our wrongs - so why should we? And the more we accept that truth and drink in God's unconditional love and complete forgiveness, the more we will become like God and the less likely we will be to keep a record of other people's wrongs.

When we experience the reality of God's forgiveness and the clean slate He gives us every day - we will be better empowered to do the same to others. Then, we will start to see the power of God's love explode in the midst of congregations like ours and then, the gospel will actually be good news again and people will be drawn to it like they always have when our God, Who is love, is revealed to them free of all the religious nonsense which has camouflaged and redefined Him for generations.

As that happens, then that powerful prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17 will be answered, for it was Jesus Himself Who prayed to the Father and said, *"I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."* (John 17:26)

The only human being ever to walk this planet who truly loved people with the heart and love of God was Jesus Christ, and now, through the mystery of God's amazing grace, it is in Christ we live and move and have our being. That is the only reason we can love anyone, because it is the love of God in Christ which constrains us, empowers us, renews us and propels us towards a lost and needy world, confident that love never fails, because God never fails.

I want to finish by doing something which may or may not work remotely via this medium. But then again it might work better than if we were all in the same room. I want you to use your imagination here. I want to remind you of the qualities of God, Who is love, but I also want to remind you of who you are becoming in Christ as you are slowly being transformed into His image. 1 Corinthians 13 explains true love to us but as I said before, it also reveals God to us. But even more than that, it reveals who we are and who we are becoming in Christ. So I want you to imagine that I am standing before God right now and I am asking God to describe you. That's right, I want God to tell me about you. I want God to describe what He sees in you and who He believes you are. So I want you to listen in your spirit now to how God describes what He sees in you. This is who you really are in Christ, right now. When I ask God to describe you, these are the words He uses:

*Patient. Kind. Content. Humble. Honouring. Unselfish. Peaceful. Forgiving.  
Truthful. Caring. Protecting. Trusting. Hoping. Enduring. Unfailing.*

Now I know some of you will struggle to receive some of those words of affirmation because you know you are not all those things most days. You know your shortcomings, your failings, your sin. So how could I have just described you? The answer is simple. The answer is Jesus. Jesus Christ is the reason God sees all those things in you because Christ is in you and you are in Christ and the more you submit to the work of His Spirit in you the more you will be transformed into the image of the One Who has given you all of this for free, by His grace.

Friends, 1 Corinthians 13 contains many things. It contains a strong rebuke to those who claim to live in Christ but act in ways which betray Him. It contains a glorious description of true love and because God is love, it contains a glorious description of God. But listen to me when I tell you that this wonderful passage also contains a glorious description of you as you stand in Christ. God sees all those things in you, even if you don't. So when you decide to believe that this is who you are becoming in Christ; when you make choices each day which are then consistent with this view of you, then your life will be transformed and people around you will be drawn to the life within you – they will be drawn to Jesus. They always are drawn to Jesus.

Let those who have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit of God is saying right now. Amen.