

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 26 February 2006

No. T0407

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The Church - The Body of Christ and Its Hope: 1 Corinthians 13

1 Corinthians 13 describes love in the most profound and beautiful terms. It has been described as a “Hymn of love”. It is also a parenthesis because, comes in the midst of Paul’s teaching on spiritual gifts which so occupied the Corinthian Christians. The beauty of its language has a tremendous impression on everyone who reads it. It is regarded as one of the most outstanding pieces of literature in any language. But the chapter is one of the most challenging passages in the Bible. And its teaching should reach into our hearts and souls and transform our lives.

Although the Bible is admired as wonderful literature, its message can be ignored or watered down. The Bible teaches that God is love and 1 Corinthians 13 expounds the reality of love. In doing so, it cuts through the unclear and sentimental approach we sometimes have to this vital subject.

The chapter begins in a striking way. “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.”

The Corinthians had become obsessed with spiritual gifts and their outward expression. One of these gifts was “speaking in tongues”. The gift is described in Acts 2 when, by the Spirit of God, the apostles had been empowered to speak other human languages which they had not learned. It has been suggested that speaking in tongues is an ecstatic language. However, Acts 2 is the only passage in the Bible that gives a detailed account of what happened when the gift of tongues was used. From that description, the gift of speaking in tongues was the ability to communicate the “wonderful works of God” in other known human languages which the speakers had not previously learned but which the hearers understood. Added to this is the evidence that God has always communicated throughout history in the different languages men speak. Missionaries spend years learning obscure languages so that they can communicate the Gospel. What Paul teaches is that however supernaturally gifted in languages we may be, if we do not have love it is only words.

Paul is not saying words are unimportant but that without love they are superficial. He compares this to the noise the brass trumpet and ringing cymbal make. It is entertaining and catches the attention but it is not life changing. The thrust of Paul’s argument is that spiritual gifts are the result of God’s love to His people and consequently can only be used to real effect if ministered in love. God did not give us gifts to draw attention to ourselves and gain admiration. He gave gifts to be used in love for the benefit of others and to demonstrate His love working through His children. Mary Slessor, the missionary, said love was to live for.

Paul writes further, “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” (verse 2)

In this verse Paul lists the gifts of prophecy, understanding and faith. All of these are needed to build up the people of God. Prophecy reveals the mind of God in terms of the past, present and the future. Understanding brings us into an appreciation of all that God is doing. Faith demonstrates our complete trust in God in the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of life. But, Paul confesses, even when these things are present but love is absent, “I am nothing”. Paul was gifted in all of these areas. But the basis of his Christian life is what he writes in Galatians 2:20, “The Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” He knew, and never forgot, that Christ loved him even when he had used all his influence, gifts and energy to destroy the Christian church. As a result, Paul now loved the very people he once persecuted. He also writes in Ephesians 5:25, “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.” Paul now ministered in love to build the church he once attempted to destroy. The essence of this verse is that spiritual gifts only bring about spiritual blessing if ministered in the power of love.

“And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” (verse 3)

This verse describes real sacrifice - the sacrificial giving of all material goods for the benefit of those in greatest need and even the sacrifice of life itself. But Paul says that if the motive of such sacrifice is not love it is of no profit. It is possible, as we see in today’s world, to sacrifice everything in the pursuit of a cause. During the Second World War, some Japanese pilots volunteered to crash their planes into allied ships, sacrificing their lives. Today we see the

emergence of suicide bombing. These actions involve, at the same time, the complete sacrifice of a life and the complete destruction of other people's lives; giving life to destroy life. The basis of true Christianity is the Christ who gave His life so that we could live. Paul shows even the greatest sacrifices we make can, without love, be empty sacrifices.

The Lottery provides an interesting insight into human nature and the raising of funds for good causes. The principle is simple and effective. Give people an incentive, in this case enormous prizes, and they will buy tickets in the hope of winning a lottery prize and the proceeds will benefit needy people and projects. It works. People pay knowing it is very unlikely they will win anything and, as a result, funds are raised to distribute to worthy causes. Remove the lottery and all the worthy causes remain but the giving diminishes. Why is it that people are unwilling to give without the prospect of gain even if it is remote? Why do we need to have the possibility of gaining something before we will give for the benefit of others? What is lacking? Love. Paul describes love as something which delights in sacrifice so that others will be helped. By implication, Paul is asking Christians what their motives are! Do we act out of self-interest or selflessly?

Paul challenges the basis of our communications, understanding, faith and practice with one incisive question, "Does love motivate us?" In doing this, he also asserts that, if love is not motivating us, there is emptiness to our actions. At the heart of Christianity is the belief that God is love and that His love has been uniquely demonstrated towards us in the gift and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He died for our salvation. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The motivation of God is His love. What is our motivation? To encourage us Paul now describes what love does.

"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up." (verse 4)

It is not by mistake that love is immediately associated with suffering. Someone has said, "The proof of love is its capacity to suffer for the object of its affection." God's love towards us has the characteristic of never giving up and at the same time, being consistently kind. In our relationships we discover how difficult it is to bear with people even when we love them dearly. It is also extremely difficult to be consistently kind especially when our love is rebuffed. Paul is not saying love is easy - he is telling us what it does. Love is often rejected but real love remains consistent. The longsuffering or long patience is characteristic of the way God's deals with us. In the words of 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." God is love and Christians are to manifest this characteristic of their Father by showing long patience and kindness towards all men and towards each other.

If love has the characteristics of not giving up and always acting in kindness there are also things love does not do. Envy is not a characteristic of love. Envy is about wanting what others have for yourself. Envy is the force which would rob others and reward me. Love is about blessing others at my expense. Love does not "parade" itself. The Lord Jesus condemned the Pharisees for taking every opportunity to let others know about their righteousness. They "paraded" what they considered were their good deeds. We all like others to know what we have done even though we try to disguise it in humility. But love does not need to display itself or seek admiration. It has the humility which Paul reminds us of in the Person of Christ in Philippians 2:1-8, "Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfil my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

Christ is the perfect expression of the love of God. Philippians teaches us that we can express the same love, in our hearts and actions, in our relationships, in our fellowship, worship and service. The words of Jesus still challenge us: "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Love "does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil" (verse 5).

These are challenging words when we think of how we can react when our love is disappointed. We are capable of rudeness, getting our own way, being provoked to anger and retaliation and finding fault. The sadness of these circumstances is never more clear than when friends, or worse, husbands and wives find themselves in situations where the love which once shone so brightly and meant so much descends into recrimination, rejection and even hatred. God presents to us the reality of His love and challenges us to show the same love we have received.

Love also "does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (verses 6-7)

Rejoicing in iniquity is being glad to be able to point out failure in others and to highlight it and take pleasure in condemning it. The national press often betrays a spirit of delight whenever it can spread across its front pages the downfall of some important or famous person. The press is often at the forefront of campaigns to bring about the humiliation of celebrity and politician alike. King David was overwhelmed with sorrow when he heard his enemy Saul was dead. He coined the words, "The beauty of Israel is slain on your high places! How the mighty are fallen." (2 Samuel 1:19) We should not find pleasure in the suffering of others no matter how much we think it is deserved. The Lord Jesus calls upon us to love our enemies and bless them that curse us. "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." (Matthew 5:44).

Love never rejoices in the downfall of others. It does, however, rejoice in the truth. The Lord describes Himself as the truth. "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life'" (John 14:6). In John 17:17, Jesus says, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). By finding Christ in the Scriptures and experiencing the sanctifying effect of the word of God in our lives, we are then empowered to bear, believe, hope and endure all things and ultimately discover, "that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

"Bearing all things" has to do with our relationships with people and our ability to bear with them. "Enduring all things" perhaps has an emphasis on bearing with our circumstances: "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). In both cases, it is the truth of God's word which sheds light and gives comfort.

But love also believes. This has to do with the present. Love also hopes. This has to do with the future. Love is nurtured by the word of God and rejoices in His will for today whilst having complete confidence in knowing the God who holds the future.

"Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part." (verses 8 and 9)

Love has the wonderful characteristic of never failing. Again the reality of this statement is seen in Christ. Love was displayed in His incarnation. God entered His own creation. Christ's life displayed the love of God in His words of grace and His power to heal, forgive and restore to life. But ultimately Christ displayed an unfailing love through His own sacrificial death. When He became our Substitute upon the cross and faced the judgement of God against our sin, His love did not fail. In the words of the Song of Solomon 8:7, "Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it." Christ's sufferings did not extinguish His love. And further, the love of Christ continues: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35-39).

God is love, His love therefore cannot fail or come to an end because He is eternal. Now this cannot be said of even the greatest of gifts. Prophecies come to an end in the sense of having served their purpose. Tongues shall cease; they will not be needed in a coming day. Knowledge shall "vanish away." What this vanishing away means is shown in the next few verses. Our knowledge and prophesying, even that of a Paul, is in part. Presently in regard to both knowledge and prophecy, perfection will be reached and, when it is, all that is partial will have completed its course and vanish away; just as the moon vanishes away in the light of the sun. Spiritual gifts such as prophecies, tongues, or knowledge are time limited and unnecessary in eternity.

"But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (verses 10-13).

Paul further illustrates his point by his own childhood. When he was a child, he spoke, thought, reasoned, as a child. When he became a man, he stopped acting as child. He reached maturity. The application of this illustration is in verse 12. The contrast lies between now and then; between our present condition, as the people of God living on earth with the restrictions of mortality and time, and the heavenly condition into which we shall be changed: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to

subdue all things to Himself" (Philippians 3:20-21). Now it is seeing as through a glass obscurely: then knowing as we have been known.

Spiritual gifts are wonderful things. In Romans 12 they are viewed as coming from God. In 1 Corinthians 12 they are linked to the Spirit of God. In Ephesians 4 they are linked to Christ. But as wonderful as they are, even the greatest gifts run their course. Knowledge and prophesying come to an end and, even when ministered in the full power of the Spirit, give an imperfect view of eternal things. This, of course, should keep us humble and exercise our faith. It is also encouraging because even Paul, for all his many spiritual gifts, lived his life looking forward to the full accomplishment of God's purposes in Christ. Although our vision is imperfect, we are given the assurance that in the future we shall know as we are known. No more mysteries, confusion or unanswered questions but shining clarity! It is amazing to think that, in a future day, not only will the great questions be answered but also all the tiny aspects of our lives will be unfolded and the hand of God revealed. David had a sense of this in Psalm 23 when he wrote, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." We are thankful to God for knowledge and prophecies but we also look beyond time to God's ultimate purposes, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

These three things abide, faith, hope, and love. "And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

The three aspects of God's life in us are faith, hope and love. Faith is about now and we should exercise it every day. Hope is about the future and will be fulfilled in an instant, "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

Love is eternal because God is love. God imparts to us faith, hope and love and we discover the greatest of these is love. Greatness amongst God's people is not found in those with the most striking gifts but those who are living in love, "And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16).

Augustine said, "One loving heart sets another on fire". May God's heart of love set our hearts on fire!

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