

That Love Chapter

February 2019

1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

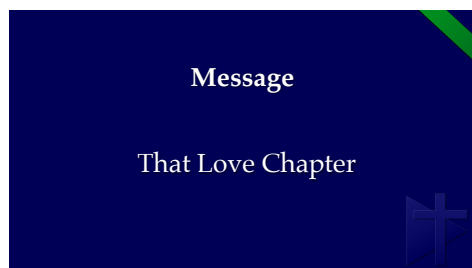
4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Introduction

What I want to do this morning is consider this beautiful text in its rightful context of teaching on spiritual worship.

I have heard real-estate agents say that there are three factors to consider. They are: Location, location, location! That could equally apply to reading the Bible as, context, context, context!



Where we find a text determines what it is talking about and how we need to read it. Taking something out of context can lead to misreading or serious distortion.

That is a risk often taken when 1 Corinthians chapter 13 is taken alone and read at a wedding. To my ears it is taken out of its setting as teaching about worship and Christian spirituality and made to stand alone as an inspiration to Christian love in marriage. Despite the risk involved in this adaption it still speaks and inspires even if it doesn't all make perfect sense. At worst it sounds nice!

'About Spiritual Things'

A walk through 1 Corinthians
12-14

Love in Context

So within 1 Corinthians we find chapter 13 placed within a coherent flow through chapters 12 and 14 so we can be confident that chapter 13 and all it says about love is part of that same teaching about spiritual worship. Its not a stand alone set piece.

We can also read from the context that these beautiful words about love show Paul's intention expressed in verse 1 of chapter 12:

“Now concerning spiritual things, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be ignorant.”

What we read here about love is part of Paul informing the Corinthians about spiritual things of which they were apparently ignorant.

Therefore what we are hearing in chapter 13 about love builds on the points Paul has been making so far in Chapter 12. What has he said so far?

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2. Christians are empowered to worship in different ways by the one and the same Holy Spirit. (12. 4-11)

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3. People are empowered for spiritual worship through being baptized / immersed in, and made to drink of, the one same Holy Spirit. (v.13)

'About Spiritual Things'

What has Paul said so far?

3. People are empowered for spiritual worship through being baptized / immersed in, and made to drink of, the one same Holy Spirit. (12.13)

4. Great corporate worship happens when all the diverse members of the body are animated by the same Holy Spirit and flow in respect for each other. (12.14-26)

4. The ideal corporate worship involves all the diverse members of the body being animated or empowered by the same Holy Spirit, flowing in complimentary harmony with respect for each other. (vv.14-26)

To sum that up:

Corporate spiritual worship is about being an open channel to the Holy Spirit and respectful of each other to the glory of Christ and the common wellbeing of the congregation.

Thus:

- No Holy Spirit, No spiritual worship.
- No respect for the diversity of the congregation, no chance for corporate spiritual worship.

So by v. 27 of chapter 12 Paul has provided some much needed understanding for the Corinthians - and for us- about spiritual worship as church.

Text A:

Paul ends chapter 12 by pointing out however that in His sovereign grace, God does empower, appoint and anoint people to some high profile roles in the life of his church. We read from v.27 to v.30.

1Corinthians 12. 27-30

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Then we come to a key verse which leads into his teaching on love in the context of addressing spiritual ignorance. In light of all that has been said about diversity and the importance of every member,

31 But strive for the greater gifts. **And** I will show you a still more excellent way.

This verse is a double-edged sword!

1Corinthians 12. 31

But strive for the greater gifts.

And

I will show you a still more excellent way.

Yes, seek to be empowered by God for the roles of apostle, prophet - speaking out God's word- and teacher. Seek grace-gifts of power, healing, service, leadership and speaking in tongues. Strive for these obvious roles of spiritual empowerment. Go for them. Make yourself available to God in these ways. STRIVE thus.

AND, as you seek/strive to grow in these spiritual roles I will show you a still more excellent way to live and move in the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit of God, the Spirit in which you were baptized and made to drink of. I will show you a more excellent way to be fruitful in the more prominent grace-giftings for which you may strive.

We need to hear the 'AND'. Seek to have the power of these roles flowing through your life AND I will reveal to you the deep spiritual character that needs to shape your life as a worshiper.

What Paul is about to set out about love is not in tension to what he has said so far. It comes as a compliment and deep enrichment. We are talking about spiritual worship, AND how to offer it better, more excellently.

Text B:

Friends we are now ready to talk about love. Let's read the opening together:

1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

1Corinthians 13. 1-3

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I have mentioned the importance of context in interpretation.

Another simple way of hearing the intended message from scripture is to note repetition. When something is said three times you can be sure that this is key to hearing what is being said:

Q: What word appears three times in this passage?

A: ‘Nothing’

The message is simple. You may be anointed and appointed to do amazing spiritual things but unless you are characterized by agape/love it amounts to a big fat zero, a nothing. A spiritual outworking that does not flow in the love of God for others amounts to nothing. Spiritual worship in the grace of the Holy Spirit without the sweet perfume of the love of God flowing through our hearts results in nothing of spiritual value.

This might be shocking to the spiritually ambitious?

Q: Tongues of mortals and angels, prophetic powers, faith to remove mountains, the ability to divest all possessions and even life itself are all empowerments of the God in people who have been immersed and made to drink of the same spirit so how can they be so bad as to amount to nothing?

A: God gives grace-gifts and does not take them back. It is as with every grace-gift, you can use it for good or non-good. I can use a grace-gift to build myself up or to build someone else up. If I lack the motivation of love in my heart I cannot build someone else up and it amounts to nothing, just a puff of spiritual gas going nowhere, a spiritual zero.

It is possible to keep operating in the gifting and empowerment of God while no longer allowing his love to sweeten our spirit and fill our hearts and flavour the worship. Don't be surprised. It happens. How many appointed ministers and godly servants dry up spiritually yet continue to function? They have been empowered at some time and yet their hearts are dry. It happens. What is needed is a fresh infilling of God's love. When we get dry we need to drink afresh of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus and allow his love to soften and sweeten us. That love makes all the difference for what our spiritual worship amounts to.

Paul is saying:

- Yes, we were immersed in the same Spirit,
- Yes, we were made to drink, again and again of the same spirit,
 - but unless the love of God is presently alive in our hearts by the Holy Spirit we will lack the essential ingredient of love that God looks for and our grace gifting will amount to a spiritual nothing.

Getting Practical:

I wonder whether the Corinthians felt a bit slapped around the face at this point when they first heard this letter read to them? Without the love in our spiritual worship we are nothing!

That could be ironic which Paul is quite capable of: A message about love that actually rebukes or challenges.

The questions then almost jumps out of the text;

- What is this love like?
- What is the love that needs to be in our hearts flavouring our spiritual worship to make it acceptable to God and profitable in his church?

'About Spiritual Things'

What is Love like?

It is time for Paul to get specific with these converted Greek-speaking pagans. As he gets practical us English speakers strike a problem.

In English, 'love' is a word required to carried many nuances which we interpret from the context.

- I love ice cream.
- I love my husband / wife.
- I love my children.
- I love the Word of God.
- I love my congregation.
- I love Eindhoven.

There are more precise English words but the problem remains.

Happily the Greek used in the New Testament had distinct words to describe the different types of love. It is a bit like the way some cultures have multiple terms for rice or how the Dutch language has precise language for waterways or bodies of water. Greek was clear about different types of what we term 'love'.

Paul's word translated as love here is *agápē* so from here on I am going to refer to *agape-love*.¹

Q: What is this *agape-love* that is so essential in our spiritual worship?

A: Here is the clearest and simplest definition I could find:

Agape-love is selfless love, a love that is passionately committed to the well-being of the other.

1 John 4. 8

"God is *agape-love*".

John 3. 16

"For God so *agape-loved* the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

This is the love seen in God. .

1 John 4:8 God is *agape-love*.²

John 3:16 For God so *agape-loved* the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.³

Agape-Love is the love of the Father, expressed through the Son and poured into us by the Spirit. It seeks the wellbeing of the other even to the extent of being self-sacrificial. This is perhaps the core economy of the Trinity. This is what makes God tick and what he looks for!

Now is not the time to cover the other Greek terms for love such as;

- *eros* romantic love
- *filia* family love
- *storgē* general affection

¹ ἀγάπη

² ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν,

³ Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ...

Happily C.S. Lewis wrote a small book entitled ‘The Four Loves’ and you can easily Google a summary of this work. [See summary in Appendix]

Paul is saying that without such an *agape*-love desire to bless others, to give, to build up and glorify, our spiritual worship amounts to nothing. From a wider reading we could add, it amounts to nothing because it does not reflect the heart of God in whose Spirit we must worship.

Application and Conclusion:

There are some churches around who need to hear this message just as Paul delivered it. There are people wanting to be spiritual giants yet acting without without *agape*-love. They thunder around making spiritual sounds but without the necessary desire to bless anyone but themselves. They amount to nothing and as Paul said it, ‘sound like a noisy gong or clanging symbol’.

Then there is what passes for love but is a plastic insipid substitute. Let me put it this way; the *agape*-love so essential for the validity of spiritual worship is not the same as ‘niceness’. So often church culture seems intent on being nice but that falls short of what *agape*-love is about. Niceness is what we can do within our resources and usually involves a bit of diplomacy, acting, conflict-avoidance and general wooliness. *Agape*-Love flows out of God’s Spirit in Christ alive within us and is able to grasp nettles and pour love into painful situations where niceness fails to go.

Mother Theresa, Albert Schweitzer and Jesus were not known as nice. They were however, beaming examples of *agape*-love.

They demonstrate that love is worked out. It starts in our hearts but always flows in action.

The world needs churches full and overflowing with *agape*-love. Being nice will not do it. *Agape*-love⁴ is poured into our hearts when we are immersed in the Holy Spirit and made to drink of that same Spirit. It is foundational for spiritual worship that pleases God and amounts to something.

Flowing Into The Prayers.

Q: Do you believe what you have heard and what you have heard here?

Let’s now pray some prophetic prayers for ourselves.

In verses 4-6 St Paul sets out what *agape*-love is and what it is not.

I am going to invite you to join with me in praying this together substituting your own name [N] for the word love.

- N is patient.
- N is kind.
- N is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
- N does not insist on his/her own way.
- N is not irritable or resentful.
- N does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
- N bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Prayers

- N is patient.
- N is kind.
- N is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
- N does not insist on his/her own way.

Prayers

- N is not irritable or resentful;
- N does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
- N bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁴ Romans 5:5 ἡ δὲ ἐλπίς οὐ κατασχύνει, ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκέχυται ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου τοῦ δοθέντος ἡμῖν,

All this because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. [Romans 5:5b]

Appendix

Summary of CS Lewis, The Four Loves

Affection (storge, στοργή) is fondness through familiarity, especially between family members or people who have otherwise found themselves together by chance. It is described as the most natural, emotive, and widely diffused of loves: natural in that it is present without coercion; emotive because it is the result of fondness due to familiarity; and most widely diffused because it pays the least attention to those characteristics deemed "valuable" or worthy of love and, as a result, is able to transcend most discriminating factors. Ironically, its strength, however, is what makes it vulnerable. Affection has the appearance of being "built-in" or "ready made", says Lewis, and as a result people come to expect, even to demand, its presence—irrespective of their behavior and its natural consequences.

[edit] Friendship

Friendship (philia, φιλία) is a strong bond existing between people who share a common interest or activity. Lewis explicitly says that his definition of friendship is narrower than mere companionship: friendship in his sense only exists if there is something for the friendship to be "about". He calls Companionship or Clubbability a matrix for friendship, as friendship can rise in the context of both. Friendship is the least natural of loves, states Lewis; i.e., it is not biologically necessary to progeny like either affection (e.g., rearing a child), eros (e.g., creating a child), or charity (e.g., providing for a child). It has the least association with impulse or emotion. In spite of these characteristics, it was the belief of the ancients, (and Lewis himself), that it was the most admirable of loves because it looked not at the beloved (like eros), but towards that "about"—that thing because of which the relationship was formed. This freed the participants in this friendship from self-consciousness.

[edit] Eros

Eros (ἔρως) is love in the sense of 'being in love'. This is distinct from sexuality, which Lewis calls Venus, although he does spend time discussing sexual activity and its spiritual significance in both a pagan and a Christian sense. He identifies eros as indifferent. This is good because it promotes appreciation of the beloved regardless of any pleasure that can be obtained from them. It can be bad, however, because this blind devotion has been at the root of many of history's most abominable tragedies. In keeping with his warning that "love begins to be a demon the moment [it] begins to be a god", he warns against the danger of elevating eros to the status of a god.

[edit] Charity

Charity (agapē, ἀγάπη) is the love that brings forth caring regardless of circumstance. Lewis recognizes this as the greatest of loves, and sees it as a specifically Christian virtue. The chapter on the subject focuses on the need of subordinating the natural loves to the love of God, who is full of charitable love. Lewis states that "He is so full, in fact, that it overflows, and He can't help but love us." Lewis compares love with a garden, charity with the gardening utensils, the lover as the gardener, and God as the elements of nature. God's love and guidance act on our natural love (that cannot remain what it is by itself) as the sun and rain act on a garden: without either, the object (metaphorically the garden; realistically love itself) would cease to be beautiful or worthy. Lewis warns that those who exhibit charity must constantly check themselves that they do not flaunt—and thereby warp—this love ("But when you give to someone, don't tell your left hand what your right hand is doing."—Matthew 6:3), which is its potential threat.