

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3

INTRODUCTION

The bible's simplest description of God and therefore God's own description of himself is "God is love" (1 John 4:16). Love is the most blessed manifestation of the character of God and John continues in that verse "Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16) therefore the simplest and most profound of Christian character is love.

It is tragic that in many churches today like the church at Corinth love is so often missing. The love that should characterise the membership and the ministry is often lacking, this was certainly true of churches in Corinth. But the church did not seem too worried about this for all that mattered to the church, or at least too many within the church, was the exercise of the public type gifts.

This church at Corinth was very gifted and for most of the time the church seemed to have right doctrinal stances apart from confusion over the resurrection, yet love the most fundamental character was missing and as a result their ministry was useless.

It seems if you look through church history, churches have struggled with the practise of love. It seems it is easier to be correct doctrinally than it is to love. It seems it is easier to be involved in Christian service than it is to show genuine love. Yet the supreme characteristic that God demands of his people is love. This chapter that we are starting to look at has always been very popular among Christians.

It has been called a "hymn of love" but we must not forget the context in which this wonderful hymn of love is found. This chapter is the central chapter in Paul's lengthy discussion on the issue of the use of spiritual gifts (chapters 12-14).

Chapter 12 talks about the giving and interrelationship between the gifts of the Spirit and chapter 14 will direct us concerning the use of the gifts especially the more upfront public gifts and in the middle is this wonderful chapter. This chapter in this context shows us the attitude and motive that we need to display in using God given spiritual gifts.

The key to accepting the gifts God has given to us and to others and the key to using the gifts in a God honouring way is genuine love.

1. SPIRITUAL GIFTS WITHOUT TRUE LOVE ARE NOTHING (vs.1-3)

Before Paul shows us the meaninglessness of all activity without genuine love we must consider what Paul means by love here.

a) What is Biblical Love - The word "love" here (agape) is one of the rarest words in Greek literature but one of the commonest words in the New Testament? Unlike our English word love, agape love never refers to romantic or sexual love, which in Greek is eros and it never appears in the New Testament. Agape love does not refer to mere sentimental sort of love the love that we have for something or someone.

The word love does not refer to brotherly love or friendship love for which another Greek word "phila" is used. We must also be clear that the word does not mean "charity" as it is translated in the Authorised version of our Bibles for charity has long been associated with giving to the needy and therefore it is an unsuitable translation for agape love.

Well what is agape love? Well this chapter is I think the best definition of what it is. The problem that we all have is that most people including many Christian people do not have any idea what

love is. Most people think of it in terms of nice feelings, warm affection, romance and even desire. But agape love is a self giving love, a love that demands nothing in return a love that is more concerned with giving than with receiving and sadly it is rare in the church today.

It is the love that is supremely demonstrated in Jesus Christ who left heaven and took on human flesh in order to give himself to death for sinners. It is a love that gives and gives and gives again even when there is no response from the receiver or there's only hostility from the receiver.

“Agape” love is so unnatural to human nature, for we are so use to loving in terms of feelings and attraction and in truth that has nothing to do with this biblical love.

True biblical love is about sacrifice of self for the sake of others even for others who may care little for us and may even despise and hate us. True biblical love is not a feeling but it is a determined act of the will, which results in acts of self-giving. Love is the willing joyful desire to put the welfare of others above our own. Such love leaves no room for pride, arrogance, self-seeking or self-glory. It is an act of choice that we are commanded to exercise even to our enemies (Matthew 5:44-45).

Now love is so vital that all that Christians do must be done out of love, right theology is no substitute for love, acts of service is no substitute for love. Nothing can take the place of biblical love and anything done in the name of Christ that is not done out of love is not true service.

Now this “agape” love is given to us by God (Romans 5:5), it is part of being a Christian, we receive it as a gracious gift from our loving God and therefore we do not have to manufacture it we simply must share it. One of the commentators sums up Christian love like this

“Love is commanded

- already possessed by Christians
- the norm of Christian living
- the work of the Spirit
- must be practised to be genuine.”

I think that is a good summary of Christian love.

Now having perhaps laboured the point a little how does love relate to the gifts of the Holy Spirit? In these verses Paul is using hyperbole language in order to make his point (vs. 1-2).

To make his point he uses exaggeration to the limits of human imagination. Using various examples Paul says that if somehow I was able to do something to its absolute extreme but did not have love I would be absolutely nothing.

Paul uses the first person because he wants the church to understand that love applies to him as well as every other Christian person.

b) Language without Love in meaningless (v 1) - Paul first imagines himself being able to speak with the great eloquence in the “tongues of men and angels” (v 1). What Paul means is this imagine if he could speak with angelic language and all sort of languages spoken by mankind with absolute fluency and eloquence, far above the greatest linguist or orator.

It is clear that Paul is speaking in hypothetical terms for no one can speak in angelic languages. Paul is saying that if he had such gifts but did not have love to go with those gifts and abilities then he would become a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. In other words, if someone speaks with great ability and with great eloquence but does so without love for his hearers, then he is just making a noise.

Now let's apply this to the church at Corinth. Many of the Christians in Corinth were seeking the gift of speaking in tongues, which was the God given ability to speak in unlearned languages. They were proud of exercising this gift and this gift was used to elevate self.

They showed no love in the use of this gift or any other gift and therefore although there was much activity as far as exercising of spiritual gifts were concerned they were just wasting their time as far as God was concerned. It was all meaningless noise to him. In Paul's day some worship of pagan gods included speaking in ecstatic noises that were accompanied by gongs and clanging cymbals to awaken the gods.

It is probably this that Paul is thinking about and saying to the Corinthians that because you do not have love then your religious activity is just like pagan worship. It is a frightening point that we all need to consider. All our activity is meaningless to God unless we do it out of genuine love. So our worship is like pagan worship unless genuine love is our motive.

The work in the youth group or children club or among the older generation or some other activity is meaningless unless we do it out of genuine love for others. You see it is so easy to do things because of what we get out of it. It might make us feel good or it might boost our ego or it might give us a sense of worth and value. It might simply be that we do it out of a sense of duty or to at least to show that we are willing.

But unless genuine "agape" love moves us to do it, then it is meaningless in God's sight.

c) Preaching without love is meaningless (v 2) - Paul continues his hyperbole in verse 2. Paul says that even the gift of prophecy, which we will see in chapter 14 Paul regards, highly even that great gift is meaningless unless it is done with love in our hearts. You can be a gifted communicator of God's truth and yet your ministry can be worthless if it is not done with true love in our hearts and with love as the motive.

We can impress men and woman with our ability to speak publicly and explain the most difficult passages in the bible and yet God is not impressed unless love is central. The power behind what we say and do is our motives. If our motive is self-interest, praise or advantage of any sort then our words and deeds will be powerless. So Paul clearly says that to proclaim God's truth without love is not simply to be less that we should be but it is to be nothing. Now the obvious application is addressed to those of us who are preachers of God's word. It is an awesome responsibility to understand and communicate God's word to a congregation and it is also a tremendous privilege.

But more important than communicating God's word effectively is the need for genuine love for those that we present God's truth too. We ought to be preaching not for our own self-interest but because of genuine love and care for the people that God places under our care.

It is so easy to have right doctrine and good principles of interpretation and good sermon structure but all of that is nothing, unless we have genuine love and unless we are preaching out of genuine love for others.

d) Knowledge without love is meaningless (v 2) - Paul continues to show that "agape" love must be at the centre of the way we use our God given gifts otherwise they are meaningless. Paul goes on to say that even if he could understand all mysteries and all knowledge yet had no "agape" love, then he is nothing. Paul seems to use the words "mysteries" and "knowledge" to indicate all understanding whether spiritual or human.

So again Paul's simple point is that we can be very clever people we can have good degrees and a good understanding of a subject but have not love then we are nothing. We might have spiritual

understanding and understand the gospel and its truths because God has revealed them to us but without love it is meaningless.

If we could understand everything that can be understood whether physical or spiritual but do not have love in our hearts then our knowledge is nothing. Now Paul is not decrying knowledge especially knowledge of God's word but he is saying it is all useless unless it is accompanied by real genuine self-giving love.

e) Faith & Deeds without love in meaningless (v 2-3) - It is the same with faith that is so strong that the person with such faith believes that mountains can be moved. In other words this faith believes that God can do the impossible but even such faith is meaningless without faith flowing from a heart of love. Paul is probably thinking about those who possess the gift of faith rather than just the faith that all Christians possess.

Such people are a real asset to churches for while the rest of us doubt the possibility of some big project the person with this gift is encouraging all of us to press on, to trust God and to see God's power at work. He is sort of person who trusts God for the impossible when most of us have given up believing that impossibilities are possible.

Yet such a person in a church without "agape" love is a disaster and causes mayhem.

Even a Christian who is willing to give all his possessions to feed the poor or is willing to die as a martyr for his faith gains nothing if they do not possess such a love (v 3). Now it is worth noting that "agape" love is always self-sacrificing love but self-sacrifice does not necessarily come from a heart of love.

There are religions that believe that self-denial, and martyrdom bring spiritual merit but such actions are done out of selfish motives and not true love.

Even as Christians we can often give to help the poor out of obligation or guilt or duty rather than out of genuine love. Our own offering to the work of the church can be meaningless to God if we give for any other reason than genuine love. It's easy to feel an attachment to the church, you might be a founder member or we can feel an attachment to the leadership because you were converted under them or have received help from them. You therefore might give because you want the work in the church to continue or you want the needs of the ministry to be met.

But they are very different reasons than the ones that Paul is giving here, for such reasons do not impress God, for we are to give because of "agape" love for God and for his people and for his work.

So the only point that Paul makes in these verses and the point that we need to learn is that what we do for the Lord or for others is meaningless in the eyes of the Lord, unless it is done out of a heart that is full of agape love for God and others. What a challenge for each one of us and a challenge that should lead us to repent of our failure to love with true biblical "agape" love.

This truth ought to lead us to seek God for grace to love as God expects us to love. We cannot manufacture this love it is already in the heart of every true Christian. But we must ask God to remove all sin that hinders this love from flowing from us and to give us opportunities to display the tremendous love of God to others through the use of our God given gifts.

May God be gracious to us and may we by his grace be enabled to demonstrate "agape" love within the church and within our community.

Amen