

1 Corinthians 13

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[0:00] When you heard the reading this morning, you might have thought that there was a wedding happening here. Jonathan and Clara are getting married and some of us are heading over that way.

Anytime Hollywood or any kind of film has a British film, an English village wedding, you're guaranteed to have 1 Corinthians 13 in the script.

Normally, somebody with a pompous voice will stand up and say it with great gusto. So when we come to it as we do this morning, in the course of the letter 1 Corinthians, it feels out of place. It feels that some kind of mistake has been made because this very famous love poem, so familiar in the wedding context, tailor-made, you could say, for weddings, comes in a section about spiritual gifts and about division in the church and about rivalry and about conflict.

So the question is, has Paul got distracted? Has Paul cut and pasted one of his wedding sermons and put it into a sermon about spiritual gifts and division in the church? Is that what's happened?

[1:28] He's been up there. I mean, this may happen. This may happen in the life of a preacher, but you're up there. You've got your notes and you turn the page and you realize you've got a page from somewhere else or you've put something in there that didn't delete something or something like that.

Has Paul done that? Well, obviously not. So we have to think, what is it that's going on? The key thing we need to understand with 1 Corinthians 13 is that Paul hasn't moved on from what he was saying in chapter 12 and what he will continue to pick up about spiritual gifts in chapter 14.

What he's doing in chapter 13 is addressing the way the Corinthians are thinking about spiritual gifts and the way that they use them. And we've seen up to this point the way that spiritual gifts have become a cause for rivalry and superiority in the life of the Corinthian church.

And Paul is showing how this division reveals a lack of the one fundamental thing that is required if you're going to call yourself a Christian.

I remember back in John's gospel when Jesus was speaking to his disciples about what it meant to be a Christian, what it meant to be a follower of Jesus, to walk in the way of Jesus.

[2:39] And he says essentially, if you want to boil it all down, the very essence of being a Christian, the chief mark of Christian spirituality, John chapter 13, verse 35, he says, This is how all people will know that you are my disciples.

This is how they'll know. If you call yourself a Christian, this is how they will know. Does he follow that then by saying, by your gifts, by your theological precision, by your impressive and successful life according to worldly terms?

No, he doesn't say that. He says, it is as you love one another. The watching world should be able to identify Christians. We should stand out.

We should be recognizable. And the thing that should mark us out is our love for one another. And Paul is saying it's absent in Corinth, and so he's rebuking them. He's correcting them.

He's trying to set them straight. His tone in this chapter has none of the warmth of the reader at that wedding. He's frustrated in actual fact as he calls them back to the love that they have lost in their life together.

[3:46] The very thing at root that is supposed to mark them out as different from the watching world, the thing that is supposed to set apart the Christian community from every other community in civilization, is the nature of our relationships, that they are marked by love.

Now, I'm glad to say, I'm very glad to say that I don't think we have people fighting over spiritual gifts among us here in Ealing. There is, however, always a temptation in church life to look down on others who don't see things the way you do, who don't share your view on the issues that you care

about, and to create cliques with those who do share your views.

So we have to hear what Paul has to say here. I want to say it's also the case, if we're being honest with ourselves, that Reformed people seem to be especially good at this kind of division.

Because we care about the Bible, because we want to do what the Bible says, even though often we can have so much in common, we fixate on the point of difference and we use it as a cause for division.

We can agree on all the key doctrines of the faith, we can agree on secondary issues, we can agree even on really niche things way, way over here, and yet we'll find the one thing on which to disagree and we'll blow it up and we'll make it the thing that causes us to fall out.

[5:06] It happens. And it happens too often. You'll even hear people in the kind of circles that I move in say very generous things about other people with whom they disagree on major theological things.

They'll say, he's a Pentecostal egalitarian, but he's a good guy. And yet, they're very critical about people in their own denomination, people in their own church family. That's not how it should be. Family conflict is the worst kind of conflict, and we often are guilty of that in Reformed circles, but it should not be. And this is where Paul starts as he talks about the importance of love in the life of the church.

That's our first point, importance. Paul starts with the importance of love. Verse 1, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

[6:11] If I give away all I have, if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. There are three conditional statements here.

Paul is saying, look, I could have the greatest gift of speech imaginable. Verse 1, But if I use those gifts without love, they'll just create a din. It's an empty noise.

Then verse 2, he says, I could have the gift of prophecy. I could know every point of theology completely accurately. And I could believe it with absolute certainty. I could have total faith.

So I could know the right things, and I could believe them in the right way completely. But without love, I am nothing. An empty person. Empty noise, an empty person.

He's saying, you could be the finest preacher that has ever stood behind a pulpit. You might understand the hardest books in the Bible completely accurately. You could be 100% certain about what the head-covering chapter is about, chapter 11.

[7:15] You could actually be right about that. You could have the whole catechism memorized. But without love, without love, it's not just, you know, it's not ideal, is it? Or, you know, oh, that's not great.

He's saying, no, you're nothing. You got all the answers right in the test, but you failed. Gifts of speech, gifts of knowledge, faith.

Then Paul turns, verse 3, to the activists. You see, if you're an activist, you see you're in there.

Those who say, I'm not really into theology. Like, I know the basics.

The basics are what it's all about. Doctrine divides. That's that kind of language. It can be a distraction. I'm a doer of the Word. Well, listen to Paul. What does he say?

I can do all good deeds. I can run myself ragged. I can give my last penny to the poor. I can sacrifice my health. I can even sacrifice my own life for the sake of Christ. But if I do it without love, I gain nothing.

[8:17] Empty noise, an empty person, and then these are just empty gestures. Without love, your words, there's nothing to them.

There's nothing there. Your actions, there's nothing there. Can you see how serious this is? Can you see how important it is that love is so central in our life together?

See, if I was to ask you, I don't know that we're getting this in general in the church. If I was to ask you what the most important part of a church is, if you were to go to the books that tell you how to run a church or how to organize your life together as a church, the how-to books, they would say, what do you need?

What is essential? Good preaching. Okay. Commitment to prayer. Yes. Gifted elders. Yes.

Servant-hearted leaders. Yes. All of those things are good things.

All of those things are going to be present in a healthy church. But Paul says the most important thing is love. Without it, everything else is empty.

[9:22] This is partly, I think, why elders in Christ's church are chosen on the basis of their character more than their gifts. Because it's possible to speak well, to understand theology, and to serve others, and still not have the one thing that actually matters.

That's the church. What about the Christian life in general? I think if we think about the way we think about what it means for us to serve the Lord Jesus, we think about it as a list of tasks to be accomplished.

And the more tasks that we can complete, the better. If we can get through the tasks, well then, our godliness will soar.

We want to be as useful as possible. Now, of course, it's good to be useful. Of course it is. It's great to be sold out for the sake of Christ. We should be sold out for the sake of Christ. But if you do it all without love, it's empty.

God doesn't need you to be useful. He doesn't need you at all. He doesn't need you. He doesn't need me. He doesn't need any of us. What he cares about is whether or not your life is marked by love.

[10:38] God did not make you a Christian because he needs you to change the world. He made you a Christian in order to change you. And to change you into the likeness of his son who is the man of love.

So think about your week ahead. If you get to this time next week and you have been amazingly productive, but you've had to crack a few heads to get there, well, would that be a win?

I, you say. It's all right for you to say that. I operate in the real world. Well, no, this is written into the real world. Would you be happy to get through the to-do list, to get all the tasks done, to get everything to have been amazingly productive, but, you know, you've had to crack a few heads to get there?

Or would you have been happy with a week where you were spectacularly unproductive, but you treated the people around you with love? I reckon if you're honest with yourself, you'd say, well, you know.

First thing you'd say is, well, you don't have to choose. It doesn't have to be one or the other. I realize it doesn't have to be one or the other. But if you did have to choose, I think many of us, most of us, if we're honest, we'd say we're about the hustle. We're about the productivity.

[11:49] We've got to get stuff done. Here's the thing. Loveless, fruitfulness, or productivity isn't fruitful or productive in the one way that matters.

You can look at your list of things that you have achieved, all of the stuff that you've got through, and if you've done it without love, you may as well not have bothered. That's what Paul is saying. Whatever gifts you've been given, love is more important. Otherwise, those gifts are nothing. I read this recently.

Nothing plus nothing plus nothing equals nothing. Nothing times nothing is nothing. Nothing to the power of nothing is nothing. Without love, Paul is saying, you're a zero.

He's not mucking about, is he? This is the real world. He's saying, look, this is how it should be in the way that you treat other people. This is how it should be in the life of the church. This is how it should be in your relationships, in your home, in your marriage, and so on.

[12:52] Love is right at the top. It is the most important thing. The more excellent way, verse 31 of chapter 12, where 13 should really start, requires love.

Saying to the Corinthians, do you want to excel? Do you want to be excellent spiritually? Actually, what you need is love. It is of vital importance. Okay?

Get the point. But what do you mean by love, Paul? What do you mean? What are you talking about? What will it look like? Well, here is where he goes next as he describes what it looks like. Point number one is importance. Point number two is appearance. Verses four to seven. This is what it looks like. What I mean is this, verse four. There is a sense in which those words don't need any further explanation.

The meaning is pretty plain and obvious. But let's press on them a bit because they are so different from how our culture thinks about love. What does it mean?

[14:16] What does love mean? I was put on to the myth of Tristan over the summer. It's a 12th century story of a man and a woman who mistakenly drink a love potion. And having drunk this love

potion, they fall hopelessly for each other.

And this potion has a power over them, and it forces them to do things. They can't control it, and it forces them to behave in ways that they may not otherwise behave.

Now, when you hear that, you think, yeah, probably that is actually how love works. And the reason that you think that is because that is how love has been defined according to every song, every film, and every story that has come along since the 12th century, pretty much.

But that's not how Paul describes it. Love, first of all, is patient. Ah, so it's not a random electric feeling that comes over you that you can't control.

The word is literally long-suffering. Love is prepared to wait. It doesn't rush to judge other people. Love gives it another go.

[15:24] You can hurt love, and love will absorb the pain, which means it gets taken advantage of. It gets presumed upon, and yet it keeps turning up. Love will wait for you and hold on to you, even when you let it down.

It's long-suffering. Love is kind. Kindness, one definition is this. I think it's fine. Kindness is the sincere desire to do good for another person.

The sincere desire to do good for another person. Having them on your mind rather than yourself on your mind. Kindness is considerate. It anticipates other people's needs.

If love is the action, kindness is what precedes the action in the heart. You see this lived out when someone calls you when you're having a hard time.

When someone offers to help you even when you didn't ask them. When someone steps in because they see that you have a need, it's a need that they can meet, and they do that.

[16:27] They do it because they saw that you had a need, and they saw the need because they weren't wrapped up in themselves. The Corinthians, you'll remember, they couldn't wait for everyone to arrive at church before tucking into the feasts.

They ate the last spoonful for seconds despite others having not eaten. Love is patient and kind. And because of this, do you see, it doesn't envy or boast.

Love takes its mind off itself, and so it can rejoice when God blesses other people. Love is happy when others get things that you don't have, even things that you really, really want, like a spouse or a baby or a job or a pay rise.

Love dictates that when the other gets those things and you are longing for them, that you're able to rejoice with them.

And it doesn't pretend to rejoice. It actually takes joy in other people's blessing. And love doesn't push itself to the front.

[17:48] Love doesn't puff itself up and talk about its own achievements. Love isn't arrogant about status or honor or gifts or anything else. And it isn't rude. It doesn't insist on its own way, pushing ahead of others, looking out for number one, asking in every situation, well, what's in this for me?

That's not love. Love is not irritable or resentful. Because love is not rude itself, it can handle the rudeness of others.

It doesn't rise to insults. It doesn't hold on to past grievances. The NIV translates this, it keeps no record of wrongs.

What a lovely description of what it means to not be resentful. You don't hold on to things that others have done to you. You don't keep them as a way of holding them against them into the future.

Love doesn't replay conversations in order to win the argument. Do you do that? I have to say I've done that a few times. I wish I'd said that. Why do I wish I'd said that?

[18:58] Because I would have shown myself cleverer or smarter or better or funnier or whatever it was. Instead, in that situation where I came off second best, I could have won.

Well, what's that if it's not me wanting to beat them? And I'm playing it over in my mind because I'm resentful. Love doesn't let bitterness take root.

Whatever someone has taken from you or whatever they're given that you had wanted, love doesn't rise.

Here's the thing. Love at root is about other people. This was a very dark week just gone.

A light went out in our world when Dolly Parton died. I mean, if you didn't wear black that day, I don't have anything for you. I'm sorry, you know. So Dolly Parton said this.

[20:02] They say love isn't about two people gazing into each other's eyes. It's about two people gazing outwards in the same direction. I believe this with all my heart. If Dolly believes it, I'll believe it.

She said lots of stupid stuff as well, but you know. The point is this. She was making the point that love is not about you. It's about other people and it's about serving.

Love is not about how you feel. It's about other people and you putting yourself to their service. As we go through that list, can you see how thinking and living this way would transform church life? Any church. If you have a church community of people who say, how does this make me feel? It becomes very difficult because me is at the center.

And if you've got lots of people who are putting me at the center, things don't work. But if you move from how does this make me feel to how can I serve, it changes everything.

[21:16] If you move from, can you believe that they said that to me? To, don't even worry about it. Can you see how that transforms everything? What a joyful and pleasant community that would be to be a part of.

And it is. By God's grace, this is the atmosphere that we have here. And long may it continue, but it doesn't just happen. We have to keep leaning on the Lord, keep resetting our hearts according to what it says here to make us like this.

And Paul, of course, has church life primarily in view when he's talking here. But this understanding of love, if you think about it, it transforms all our relationships. How does this make me feel?

Changing to how can I serve? Well, that transforms your friendships. You don't hold grudges. You put yourself out for the other. It transforms families.

Because there's no bickering. There's no wanting what you can get. There is, what can I do to serve you? And, of course, what about marriage? If we have this reading at weddings all the time, what would marriages look like if they actually embodied what is being taught here?

[22:26] If we grasp that this is what love is, first of all, the first thing it will do is it will lower our expectations. We'll see that marriage isn't about somebody else making me feel the way I want to feel all the time.

It's about mutual service in this way. It's about the building of fruitful households. And then, secondly, if you've got a marriage where the atmosphere is this kind of patience and kindness and forgiveness and humility and grace, who wouldn't want to belong to a marriage like that?

All, I think it's fair to say, all of our problems in marriage come back to selfishness. Theirs or mine. But if we love like this, as the selfishness goes, so will the problems.

Love seeks the good of the other. Which also, by the way, is why love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. Do you see? It rejoices with the truth.

This is important. And our culture is way off on this point. You know, we're told that love means we offer unconditional affirmation to someone else's choices. That's not love. Our culture says that whatever you think or say or do is right and good.

[23:38] That can't be right, can it? Of course it can't. Play that out any kind of ways. The person who thought it was right to stab somebody, they go, well, that was right. You say, no, of course it wasn't. It would be absurd to agree in that situation.

And that is why real love rejoices in the truth. It always seeks the objective good of the other person. And for that to happen, it needs to be in line with the truth.

Love refuses to take any joy in sin, to pretend that sin is okay. So it won't celebrate what God disapproves of.

It cannot raise a glass to unrighteousness. It cannot glorify that which God says is inglorious. That's not loving.

One thing this means is that true love, 1 Corinthians 13 love, will, quote, be accused of many things and the central charge will be that it is unloving.

[24:35] This is because people are defining love out of the wrong dictionary. In the famous love chapter, love refuses to rejoice in unrighteousness. Not only so, but love links arms with the truth and they rejoice together.

So it is necessary then, verse 7, that love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. It's a lovely realism there.

That isn't cheesy. That isn't head in the cloud stuff. That's proper country music truth. Love takes it on the chin and isn't cynical, isn't pessimistic. That's what Paul means by believes and hopes all

things.

And love keeps going. Love plays the long game. It endures all things. This is what love really looks like. And the reason that Paul profiles it for the Corinthians in the way that he does here is to highlight that they've fallen short.

To highlight their failure in this regard. As they hear this description, they can't miss how far short their rivalry and their pride and their division fall. Okay, but we feel undone by this.

[25 : 41] Where do we go? Well, how do we find this kind of love? Where do you go when you feel challenged by this kind of thing? Well, we need to go thirdly to its permanence.

Its importance, its appearance, and then thirdly, its permanence. Verse 8, love never ends. Now, as for prophecies, they'll pass away. As for tongues, they'll cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. Verse 13, so now faith, hope, and love abide these three. But the greatest of these is love. Love never ends. The Corinthians are taken up with prophecies and tongues and spiritual knowledge and making in crowds and cliques and rivalry happen as a result of these.

And he's saying, but those things are temporary. They're for a time. They're anticipating the arrival of the perfect, the complete, full, final revelation of God in the Scriptures.

[26 : 40] When that comes, these temporary gifts will pass away. Paul is saying that the gifts of prophecy and tongues and so on belong in the church nursery. They were needed when the church was an infant.

But as she grows up, they get left behind. But the things that remain, the things that abide, verse 13, faith, hope, and love.

Those are what you need for the Christian life. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Hope in his coming again. And love for the brethren. And the greatest of these is love.

Because it is the characteristic that most reflects the God who is love. The God who showed his love for us in going to the cross to pay in death and blood for our sins.

When the Apostle John describes God's love in 1 John 4, he says, This is love. Not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

[27 : 40] At the cross, the love of God is displayed for the whole cosmos to see. The love of God that triumphs over sin. A love that reaches beyond our sin.

You know that you can never out-sin the love of God in Christ. Our sins, they are very, very, very many. But his mercy is much, much more.

And here's the reason we know that. The cross of Christ. It is at the cross that we realize that before we are called to love another person, we have been loved.

Before we are called to give love, we have first received it. And that is always how it works. If you are not a Christian, if you're here this morning, perhaps you came through Holiday Bible Club last week.

We are thrilled that you're here. You're so welcome. I want you to hear this. This is the vital first step to being able to do any of the stuff we're talking about this morning. You go to Christ.

[28 : 45] Unless you have received his love, you don't have it to give to other people in any meaningful way. So turn your life over to Christ. And allow Christ's love for you to transform your heart for others.

The apostle John goes on in that passage, 1 John 4 verse 11. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. That's the order. We go to Christ.

We receive his love. And his love transforms us to love other people. And because we have received the love of Christ, we have it to give. So this morning, as we read these verses, we hear verses 4 to 7.

And all of us, I hope all of us say, I wish I could love a bit more like that. I wish I could be more like that. The answer is to go to Christ. Go to Christ and get close to him.

Go to Christ.

[30 : 08] Go to Christ. Take him at his word. Allow his truth to change you so that you are changed to live for others. It is in Christ's presence. There's nowhere else that we are changed to be like him, the man of love.

So in a world that is creaking under the strain of anger and bitterness, we need the transforming love of Jesus. If we will thrive as a church, if we will live in our families under the blessing of God, if our relationships will flourish, we must give ourselves to love.

And we do that because we can. Because we have first been loved by Christ. That is the more excellent way. Let's pray.

[illegible]