**3rd February 2019**

**1 Corinthians 13.1-13**

It is that time of year when the shops are full of red hearts, chocolates and Valentine cards. As a teenager I used to hate Valentine’s Day because I never got any Valentine cards! In my first year at university my ’friends’ decided to do a prank and put up notices in the female hall of residences, those where the days when the boys and the girls were separated, notices that said Simon Helme is a lonely lad and needs a Valentine Card. When I got half a dozen cards I thought I was Mr Popular only to find out they had all been sent in pity!

When we think of the word ‘LOVE’ it is easy to think red hearts, chocolates, fluffy romantic stuff. When I googled ‘[news stories on love](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/love)’. I got a string of articles with the following titles:

[The four ways to tell love from lust](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/dating/love-lust-how-tell-difference-sociology-relationship-first-sight-dating-a8674096.html)

[Londoners in couples take longest to say ‘I love you’, study finds](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/london-i-love-you-longest-say-uk-cities-study-eharmony-a8515211.html)

[Most single men blame relationship status on poor looks, study claims](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/men-single-relationship-status-study-reddit-looks-confidence-flirting-a8483216.html)

[Britons need to go on nine dates before they commit, finds study](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-dating-relationship-success-find-partner-online-apps-commitment-a8481321.html)

[Men with higher verbal intelligence more likely to marry, study finds](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/verbal-intelligence-men-marry-more-likely-study-finland-couples-relationships-a8263106.html)

[Warmer weather increases break-ups in the spring, psychologist says](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/cuffing-season-uncuffing-breakup-relationship-warm-weather-summer-spring-a8256376.html)

I have no idea how they do these studies and gather this research – but someone is reading it looking for love and how to stay in love!

Two girlfriends were on vacation when they see a five storey shop advertising men for sale. They go in and see a first floor sign that reads ‘all men on this floor are short and ugly’. The women decide to take the elevator to the next floor. There the sign reads , ‘all men here are short and handsome’. This isn’t good enough, so the women continue up. On the third floor the sign reads’ ‘all the men on this floor are tall and ugly’ the women want to do better so they keep on going. On the fourth floor the sign reads ‘all the men here are tall and handsome’. The women get excited but decide to see what’s on the fifth floor. There they find a sign that reads, ‘no men here. This floor was built to prove there’s no way to please a woman’.

The joke could of course be reversed. There’s no way to please a man. But it suggests that we live in a society where people face great temptations and they are constantly struggling to find satisfaction and happiness.

The influence of social media is in the news virtually every week now. The suicide of Molly Russell a 14-year-old, has been put down to the influence of Instagram.

YouTube Instagram, Facebook all nakedly reinforce the idea that popularity is the benchmark of your worth. You want to be liked! You want to be loved! And (like the offline world) popularity usually goes along with being good-looking, charismatic and entertaining., wealthy and successful. The message is: if you’re not winning at life, you’re not worth much.

Rates of anxiety and depression among youth have sky-rocketed in recent years.

Stuff can go wrong in our personal lives too that make us think we are unlovable, worthless.

A friend of mine a while back his sister got divorced from her husband. He had been seeing someone else which of course made her feel awful and rejected. On the point of suicide, she decided to go to church, looking for hope. She had been brought up in church but had discovered sex drugs and rock and roll and not darkened the doors since. But one last chance.

The minster was giving his all age talk: he held up a £20 note and asked, ‘Who would like this £20 note?’. It was church folk, so they all put their hands up. ‘well first let me do this’ he said and proceeded to crumple the note. ‘Who still wants it? The hands remained in the air.

‘Well what if I do this?’ he continued. He dropped it onto the ground and started to grind it into the floor with his shoe. He picked it up then put it a bag of manure. Taking it out, crumpled and dirty he said, ‘now who still wants it?’ Still the hands stayed in the air.

‘my friends, you have all learned a very valuable lesson. No matter what I did to this money, you still want it because it does not decrease in value. It is still worth £20. Many times, in our lives, we are dropped, crumpled and ground into the dirt by decisions we make and by circumstances that come our way. We feel as though we are worthless. But no matter what has happened or what will happen, you will never lose your value in god’s eyes. Human beings can let us down, parents can let us down. But to God, dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, you are still priceless to Him.

The illustration cut to the heart of my friends’ sister and proved a turning point for her life. She rebuilt her life knowing her worth in God’s sight. She is now remarried and has a couple of kids, she travelled through the dark period of her life and found light at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

If you don’t feel loved – let us pray for you: Paul says in Romans chapter 5, that the work of the Holy spirit is to pour out God’s love into our hearts: we are not worthless – but dearly loved, loved so much that Christ died for us. You are loved.

As we continue our look at Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians chapter 13 is both one of the best known and most ignored passages in the Bible! It is also regularly taken out of its context. It is a popular bible reading at weddings because on the face of it, it is all about love. Yet it is not about romantic or erotic love.

First-century Greek had three words for love. *Philia* covered general expressions of affection and friendship, but also the strong bonds between parents and children. *Eros* was reserved for sexual passion with its strong emotions. Neither were really suitable for Christian love: the love of God for his Son that is reflected in the love that Christians should cultivate for each other and for all people.

So, Paul used another Greek word for love, *agape*, a word not much used. It was a relatively ‘clean’ word that could be filled with meaning, so it became the word commonly used in the New Testament for a distinctively Christian love, something disinterested, not based on emotion, and not limited to friends and family. Indeed, it should be extended to one’s enemies (Matthew 5.44). ‘Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend’ (Martin Luther King Jr). This is not the only place where Paul talks about *agape*, for it occurs in every one of his letters – for example, see Romans 12.9-18.

The context for this chapter is important. It is sandwiched inside a discussion of spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14. Some have the higher gifts, some more modest ones, but all contribute to the body of Christ. The point that Paul makes here in chapter 13 is that no matter what spiritual gifts a person may or may not have, the one thing that is indispensable is love.

If you do an internet search on ‘love’ you will end up almost exclusively with examples of *eros*and almost nothing of *agape*. Our society is obsessed with the erotic and romantic aspects of love – to such an extent that people fall in and out of love at regular intervals.

However, when Christians fall out with one another, then we are not good examples of *agape. Agape* isn’t always our first response when we read, see or hear something that goes against our life preferences or makes us unhappy and upset.

The English language has roughly 558 ‘emotion’ words. It is instructive to learn that 62 per cent of these words express anger, depression, envy and the like – not exactly ‘positive’ emotions. And, yes, only 38 per cent of the words express positive emotions such as love, joy, tenderness. In the same vein, studies have shown that, for newcomers to church, one negative experience can only be offset by six or seven positive experiences! As human beings, we seem biased towards negative emotions and experiences. We need to be much more mindful and deliberate about conducting our lives by the more ‘excellent way’ of love!

Listen again to the qualities that Paul believes true Christian love is, they are worthy of silent and slow reflection on:

***4****Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.****5****It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.****6****Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.****7****It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

***8****Love never fails.*

It can be a powerful exercise to first of all consider the life of Jesus and how he exemplified this type of love.

Then to put your name next to each virtue as a spot check kind of exercise:

Simon is patient, Simon is kind. Simon does not envy, Simon does not boast, is not proud.  And so on…

You realize you have a lot to work to do! But rather than feel a failure or guilty, realize that we are all works in progress – that God hasn’t finished with us yet. Prayerfully ask for Gods’ grace to shape you more into this identikit of what love is all about.

It is striking when you look at this list what is missing: It doesn’t say love is having positive feelings. Love is not even about being happy.

Tony Campolo shared a story about a friend who at the pinnacle of his career, resigned a key leadership role at a Christian University in the States in order to take care of his wife who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. The woman was in her early fifties and her mind disintegrated rapidly. Not only was she incapable of recognizing her husband she could not even recognize herself when she looked into a mirror. Her husband had to feed her. She lost the capacity to speak. She drooled and made slobbering sounds. Nevertheless, he cared for her day in and day out.

His friends tried to convince him to put her into an institution where she would get proper care. They urged him to put her into a place where her basic needs would be met and where people would kindly attend to her requirements for comfort. They pleaded with him not to give up his career and waste his time caring for her. They begged him not to turn away from what was an important ministry to the church, and kept reminding him, ‘She doesn’t know who you are! She doesn’t recognize you! Then someone laid the ultimate guilt trip on him by saying, ‘You’re reneging on your calling from God!’

His answer was remarkable. He said, ‘You’re right! She doesn’t know who I am. But, I know who she is! And furthermore, there’s only one thing that takes precedence over a calling from God – and that’s a promise in the sight of God. And I promised her before God that I would love her and be there for her until death do us part.’

Tony Campolo concludes his story by commenting: ‘I don’t think he’s a happy man, but I am convinced that he’s a good man. Being good is more important than being happy; and there are times when we must be ready to forfeit our happiness in order to do the good and loving thing that is required of us. ‘

And I think that is the challenge of this list about love: this is the biting point which is so counter cultural to the messages and attitudes our wider society tells us: That first and foremost we need to be happy. Of course no one would prefer to be miserable. But love is an action, a commitment of the will to do good, rather than to feel good. And there are times when we must be ready to forfeit our happiness in order to do the good, the most loving thing that is required of us.

At the present time, our knowledge of God, our understanding of mysteries, our prophecies are limited; but when we see God face to face, then we will know God as much as we are now known by God.

Paul wants the Corinthians to above all to learn to think in terms of God’s future and its relation to the present – which is why chapter 15 will get them to place the resurrection of Jesus at the centre of their view of the world, time history and themselves. And why love matters and love lasts.

And the people who we have loved and lost , today we remember Jean Jukes, but our hearts are grieving at the recent loss of Gladys, and no matter how long ago partners and friends departed from us we still carry those losses with us – but all those people are not lost to the love of God – because love is eternal and never fails.

Three poetic images Paul uses. The first is the image of the child growing to maturity: growing in love attaining what you can in this world and finishing the process in the world to come: *finish then thy new creation pure and spotless let us be….*

The second image is of a mirror- when you look in a mirror it is all back to front – but one day we will see face to face – with hindsight we will be able to see the mysterious way of God’s love in our lives – in the world to come all will be plain to see.

Which leads to the third image: Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

What matters now is not our knowledge of God but God’s knowledge of us, but our knowledge of God will be complete in the age to come. Think in God’s time plan Paul is urging them. Keep on loving, doing what is right and good – because love will last into God’s new world and God will complete it.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

**Bibliography:**

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