

“Love: The Most Excellent Way”

3 October 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 407 How Deep The Father’s Love

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Sermon:

We live close to UCD. It is very common to see students following directions on their phone as they try to find their way to the campus. When in a new area I will use the Sat Nav in our car, and many cyclists and walkers have good GPS maps and trackers. They are fantastic tools in navigation. All of us need direction!

I was struck by the claim of the Apostle Paul in v1 of 1st Corinthians Ch 13 “*and now I will show you the most excellent way*”, that is the best way and as the best way it can be argued is the only way that life should be lived. Therefore, what he is about to say is important, indeed vital for living life well.

The context is the use of spiritual gifts in church. So, he is specifically speaking about how we should live in church. It is “a way”, an action, or an ethic. The most excellent way is love.

I. What is NOT the most excellent way! (v.1-3)

The city of Dublin is always changing! We are watching a brand-new office block being built opposite our front door. Before the new build the old building must be cleared away and not just on the surface, the builders go deep and remove below the ground to establish the foundations and build in the infrastructure needed to sustain the building.

Before Paul explains the most excellent way of love, he must demolish any remnants of what love is not and he does this with reference to the use of gifts. He does not set himself apart from the church, because he uses the first person pronoun “I” in these verses. Its personal, Paul used these gifts and in doing so he understood the temptation to use them without love.

- If he speaks without love, using human languages or heavenly languages he is just noise, an infuriating constant hitting of a cymbal.
- If he uses the gifts he prizes without love, it is worthless.
- If he sacrifices everything without love it achieves nothing.

We know that the Corinthians valued those who were gifted, they liked Apollos, the highly educated, impressive speaker from the university town of Alexandria. I want us to imagine having these gifts, ability in languages, biblical knowledge and insight, an ability to speak and communicate well, faith that can move mountains and a deep self-sacrificing drive who wouldn’t want to have such a person as their friend and elder. This person is highly gifted and motivated!

However, what is important is not what we can do but why we do what we do and who we do it for? What motivates us? If we do not have love in our hearts as we use these gifts, we are nothing and gain nothing. That is shocking and needs to be thought about. Do we live life for

the praise of others, or financial gain, or prestige and position? Do we truly love God and love others?

Now self-examination is not an easy thing to achieve. Often the way God helps us to discover our true self is by allowing us to be tested. This week a colleague explored Job Ch 1 with me and other ministers, Job's life was severely tested by loss and his response, *"he fell to the ground in worship....The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be blessed."*

Job had everything taken away, but he proved his love for God through worship of God when everything was taken away. Jesus was also tested at the beginning and end of his ministry, in the desert and in Gethsemane by being given the opportunity to say no to the selfless sacrifice and do everything for his glory and to avoid death. He had all the gifts in perfection. He was a fantastic communicator, he made theology fun, he related it to everyday life, he told memorable stories. He had perfect wisdom, he saw hearts, he read minds, he understood people and the times perfectly, and the wisest teachers of the bible couldn't fault him on his understanding of the law even at 12 years of age! Jesus' prayer life was attractive to his followers, "Lord teach us to pray" they said, and he could make mountains move (metaphorically) the seas calmed, the winds stopped, the leprosy disappeared, the blind saw, the deaf heard, the hard hearted melted. And he lived life without possessions, and with a total focus on others giving his life on the cross as a sacrifice for us. In his moments of testing, he proved his love of God His father and of us, he did everything in obedience and for the glory of God and for us.

Like me you might despair at your lack of love. Our response is to repent and ask God to give us his love. *"God is love, 1 John 4:8, v16 We love because he first loved us, v10 Be imitators of God, therefore as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Eph 5:1-2"*

Love is not about the gifts but about their use for the glory and love of God and the benefit and love of others.

II. What IS the most excellent way (v.4-7)

I once saw a sign on the back of a Learner Driver instructors' car. *"Driver under instruction, thank you for your patience"*. That is a rebuke to many of us who are easily frustrated by the slow pace and inability of L drivers to get away at junctions. Love is patient. Love is kind. This is the love shown by parents whose children are termed "prodigals" who do not live, as they were brought up and who are by their behaviour, attitude and speech living in a way that brings great tension. How to love in great disappointment? With patience and kindness. Only by the grace of God can we do so.

Paul then frames what love is highlighting what it does not do to contrast the positive. To understand why he does this we need to keep in mind the context of Paul's writing. The Corinthian church were not loving, as indicated by their behaviour and divisions, so this letter is a corrective one, he uses negatives as a way of explaining what love is. You Corinthians have been envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, angry, and keeping records of wrongs (taking people to court Ch 6) that is not love.

(v6) As I watched the news this week, I realised my interest had peaked at a certain news item because there was a piece about a lady celebrity who had been arrested. Reading this verse and the commentary around it was sobering. It is easy to be lulled into dulling the

reality of evil in our society, laughing at what is crude, entertained by violence, intrigued by the sexual, and participating in gossip. Love doesn't, love resists evil and rejoices or celebrates what is true.

(v7) The standard is always very high. There is a tenacity in the present (protects and perseveres) and a confidence for the future (trusts and hopes) We see glimpses of this love in parents who love their child when their situation is desperate and unending, with disability, or when wrong decisions are made, and their desire is to protect, trust, hope and persevere.

Do we see it in our church family? Sadly, it wasn't evident in the Corinthian church. Do we often attack, do we find it hard to trust, do we despair, do we give up and even walk away? Sadly, we do, and that is not the direction of love!

The only person to love perfectly is the Lord Jesus and we have knowledge of that through the revelation of his life in the scriptures. One verse that says this particularly clearly is Romans Ch 8: 38, *"nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Again, the way to have more love is to admit its lack, repent and ask God to change our hearts with his love. (This is the dynamic of biblical change).

III. The most excellent way never fails (ends) (v.8-13)

The ESV better captures the sense. Yes, love doesn't fail (NIV) but it doesn't end. The gifts will, prophesy, tongues, knowledge. Why? Because a time is coming when perfection comes, and the imperfect disappears. (v10) Love looks to the future! (When perfection comes v10; and then v12)

Paul is thinking of Jesus coming back again as he promised, (*John 14:3 If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*) In Ch 15 he will tell us more about the glorification of our bodies and our being in heaven.

He uses two illustrations to get the point across. Firstly, leaving childish ways behind as we transition to adulthood. The emphasis is not primarily about maturing, but about living in a different time with different rules. When a baby coos or makes incomprehensible sounds we rejoice, or when a 4-year-old speaks in simple words and incomplete sentences we acknowledge such speech as appropriate for that age, but when an adult is childish in their use of words and expressions of life, we recognise this as inappropriate and out of place. Heaven is a new era with perfection, imperfection is inappropriate!

The second illustration uses a mirror. Corinth was known for the manufacture of very good mirrors. Paul says even the best reflection is not the same as face to face. We might say the best High-Definition image is not the same as face to face, not just in terms of clarity but in terms of presence. Jesus knows us perfectly and continues to love us, then we will know him perfectly and realise that our love for him now was not misplaced or in vain.

"The wise Christian (says David Jackman) lives in the light of these eternal certainties and permanent eternal values, not in transient earthly experiences, and such a life involves being committed to love."

V13 clinches the argument, now in the present, we need faith, hope and love but then when face to face with Jesus and perfected, faith is not needed because Jesus is seen face to

face, hope is fulfilled, and we live every moment in that reality and yet love is the constant response of God to us and us to him. It never ends and therefore is de facto the greatest. The character of God is love and will pervade heaven for eternity, it is the most excellent way, it is God and other person focused, and it never ends.

Conclusion:

1. 1st Corinthians Ch 13 is one of the best pieces of literature about love ever written. We treasure it.
2. The subject of this passage is the character of God, God is love and love is seen perfectly in the life of Jesus.
3. We must accept the fact we do not love like this and look to God for his love. Admit our lack of love, seek God's forgiveness and grace, ask for the Holy Spirit to fill us with his love, the first fruit of the Holy Spirit is love.
4. We acknowledge this is written to a church that showed signs of unloving behaviour (in their use of gifts) and in other ways. A church like us! We are encouraged that they are and remain the church.
5. We rejoice in the use of the gifts in church and seek to use them in a loving way for God's glory and the service of others.
6. We recognise love as the most excellent way.

Praise: IPH 509(ii) Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: IPH 551(ii) O Jesus, I Have Promised

Benediction

Discussion Questions:

Consider Paul's description of love. How is this love seen in the life of Jesus?

Why do you think Paul took time out from his teaching about gifts and church order (Ch.12 & Ch.14) to speak about love?

Choose an aspect of love you find particularly challenging. Why is it challenging? What is your hope in that challenge?

What incentive does Paul give us to persevere in the way of love in v.8-13? What might it look like for you to persevere in the way of love this week?