

God's people, then and now

Part 4

1 Corinthians 13

¹If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And 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. ³If 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.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends.

This beautiful description of love is written to show the Corinthians how their behaviour contrasts to it. The first half stresses the central importance of love. It doesn't matter how talented or spiritual or smart you are, if you do not love all else is worthless.

Paul is the author of Corinthians and though some may dispute his authorship of later letters, even the skeptics believe Corinthians is really his. That Paul, who tried to imprison Christians and who stood by while Stephen was stoned was so changed that he could write such a passage is powerful evidence of the transforming power of God. Love is a proof of transformation.

Love is central to the Christian faith. Buddhism teaches detachment, that you can reduce your suffering by not becoming attached to things/people that will not always be with you. Christianity teaches that love is essential and that suffering is also part of being human. To love is to risk losing.

“There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything at all and your heart will certainly be wrung, and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, and irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.” CS Lewis

Matthew Henry writes that love is an “utter enemy to selfishness”, not requiring that you neglect your own needs but that you never seek your own interests at the expense of the needs of others. “How excellent would Christianity appear to the world, if those who profess it were more under this Divine principle, and paid due regard to the command on which its blessed Author laid the chief stress!”

I don't think it would make us popular with everyone. People who want to live in selfishness and greed would be offended and they can be wealthy and powerful. I wonder if we are offending the right people?

Now there are a variety of Greek words that all get translated “love” in English. Depending on what source you read there could be 4 or up to 8. They have one word for romantic passion (Eros), another for brotherly love or friendship (Philia), this is the comradery that developed when men had fought side by side. Similar to this is Storge, which is familial love but asymmetrical, such as the love of parents for their children. Universal love for strangers, nature or God is called Agape. It is unselfish and unconditional, and can also describe giving of all of your love to another such as parents would to an only child. Only Agape and Philia occur in the New Testament, all the passages I’m talking about today use “Agape”. If we take Paul’s description here as a definition of Agape love, it adds an extra dimension to a lot of the New Testament.

If you search the New Testament for the word “love” it comes up with 300 results. I am not going to go through them all today. I did read them all and it was a good exercise I recommend trying it. I have just chosen a representative selection for you (and the references will be in the study guide so you don’t have to write them all down).

An understanding of the nature of Agape love is a window into the character of God.

God is love

1 John 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

God is love and consistent with his nature, God loves the world.

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

Including us:

Romans 5:8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

We see the sacrificial, unconditional nature of love in God’s desire to save those who do not deserve it. Lewis writes that “God who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that he may love and perfect them”. If “wholly superfluous creatures” isn’t bad enough he later rephrases it in even less flattering language: “God is a ‘host’ who deliberately creates his own parasites, causes us to be that we may exploit and take advantage of Him. Herein is love”.

John also links love of God with love of other people. If God is love and we are made in his image then this is not just a description of how we treat a few select people who we happen to like. It is who we are meant to be. We are meant to be love as God is love. Need a refresher? *4 Love is patient, kind; not envious or boastful or*

arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Love is a fruit of God's Spirit

Galatians 5:22 *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control.*

If God's Spirit lives in us his love will grow in our lives. As always it raises the question: is love something we do (effort) or just a gift from God (Grace)? As always the answer is "both". C.S Lewis describes Love as a *garden that grows in our lives but our will is the gardener that tends it.*

Love is at the heart of the greatest commandment:

Matthew 22: ³⁶*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?* ³⁷*He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."*

We are to love God even more than we love our families or they become idols. This is not to say that we can be guilty of loving people too much but we can love God too little. Think how much you love the special people in your life. We are told to love God more than that. This is not about the feelings we have for them, but about who comes first in our lives when we make choices.

So now I'm finally going to get to the marriage part. Husbands and wives are instructed to love one another. The fact that it needs to be instructed tells us it doesn't just happen naturally, especially in ancient society when the couple may not have even chosen each other.

Husbands love their wives

Ephesians 5 ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ... ²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies.

And in case you are worried that it is one-sided I did discover there is mention in Titus of women being required to love their husbands. The Corinthians passage for today is not specifically addressing married couples but it is often used at weddings and I think with good cause. Paul describes Agape love and it is Agape love we are told to show to our partners. It is particularly important with the recent revelations of how endemic domestic violence is in our society that we be able to distinguish real Godly love from harmful obsession or attempts to control.

Sarah Moon is a Christian whose first boyfriend used his (supposed) love for her as justification for abuse. We have seen in the media lately how widespread this practice is and heard the horrific stories of what happens when churches do not have a good understanding of Godly love. They are not able to rebuke abusers and they end up inflicting even more pain on survivors. If we do not know what true love – God's love – looks like we will not recognise abuse when we see it. We have the definition and the experience of God's love; we should be better at spotting the abuse of it than the secular community.

Sarah Moon writes *“God is the opposite of abuse, because God is love, and love is the opposite of abuse. Images that twist the meaning of love to paint God as a cruel and hateful abuser do not do God justice. As a Christian community, we need more images of God that affirm God as a God of love. We can drive out the darkness of abuse, but only with the light of love.”*

This Agape love is not limited to romantic relationships. Paul’s letter is written to a church. It was a collection of all the people in Corinth who believed in Jesus. Like the married couples of the day they didn’t choose each other either. There was no church-shopping back then to find one with people and a worship style that you liked. If they were in your city and believed in Jesus they were your family. John records Jesus’ words to his first disciples:

Love other Christians

John 13:34 *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* ³⁵*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’*

The author of Hebrews has this little gem:

Hebrews 10:24 *And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.*

I was quite struck by this verse. How do we do that? How do we provoke one another to love? I wonder if loving each other is a start. It is hard to love others if you yourself have not known love. I’ll leave you to discuss this one in your small groups.

How are you doing so far? All good with loving God and loving spouses? What about loving other Christians? Well just in case you think it’s all too easy the last one should catch everyone.

Love your enemies

Matthew 5: 43 *‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.”* ⁴⁴*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* ⁴⁵*so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.* ⁴⁶*For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?*

Now this is seriously hard. Love is not niceness, love is not weak, it is not a feel-good faith for those who lack good theology.

Rachel Held Evans: *“But when I consider the love that Jesus showed and that I am commanded to imitate, the last words to come to my mind are “nice” or “weak.” To love as Jesus loved requires more strength and conviction than a human being without the Spirit can muster. It requires giving without expecting anything in return, forgiving enemies, withholding judgment, assuming the position of a servant, looking after the forgotten, and caring for neighbours. It requires living counter-culturally by resisting the temptations of indulgent wealth and self-serving power. The kind of love that Jesus taught and exemplified crystallizes on the cross, where looking down on*

those who had put him there Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do. That. Is. Not. Weak."

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.*

I have some very early childhood memories. One of them is me lying in my parents' bed one morning and searching back to my earliest memory and announcing "I can remember when the world began", assuming that the first thing I could remember was the first thing that had ever happened. This assumption had persisted. In Sunday School we had learnt the creation story so I conceded there must have been Adam & Eve and then my family. One time when I was five we were out grocery shopping. We went to an independent supermarket owned by some friends of ours where my parents had worked part-time and knew everyone. I was just starting to learn to sound out words so when we got to the checkout I could read the checkout-lady's name and it was Dot. I remarked that that was a funny name (why would someone be named after poker-dots?). She told me Dot was my grandmother's name. I said "my grandma's name is Joan" Mum explained "Grandma is my mum, Dad's mum was called Dot". I must have asked where this other Grandmother was (wondering why I hadn't met her and why she didn't give us presents) because Mum said one sentence that rocked my whole worldview "she died before you were born". Suddenly it was clear. A whole generation of people had lived their whole lives and died before I was even born. If Dad had a Mum he had once been a child. All at once the Play School song "in the olden days, when your grandma was a baby, in the olden days" took on new meaning.

As we grow our worldview is constantly challenged and needs to change as we encounter new information. Our view of the world now is vastly different to what it was when we were children. You may not have shared my mistaken view of things, maybe you had your own mistaken view or maybe you just don't remember. In this passage Paul tells us that such a dramatic shift will occur when we finally see God face-to-face. Children have narrow views and confused ideas and that is what we are like now compared to when we are face to face with God. Our perspective on everything will be different then. Lots of the things we have valued will not seem important at all. We will not need faith and hope when we can see and enjoy, but we will love God and each other perfectly as love is perfected. We cannot see God perfectly now but Love is the glimpse we do have. While a lot will change love will remain.

¹³*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*