

1 Corinthians 13 // YouVersion Events

It is halftime of the big game, a soccer match that pitted the seemingly indestructible home team against the rag tag visiting footballers that really don't seem to have a chance. The first 45 minutes of the match were awful. The visiting team's captain had it together and was playing well but every other player was in a world of their own and frankly looked like they were scared to be on the pitch. The visiting goalie was a siv and it was as if he was playing for the home team, letting into the goal, ball after ball.

In the locker room the mood was somber, as if the great run of a season was coming to an end right then and there. The space smells of defeat and sore bodies ready to give up. Why should they even attempt a second half? Then the Captain quiets everyone and starts laying out the game plan for the second half. And we are set for a rousing speech that will turn the tide. As he speaks though he bends down and starts to take the shoes off his teammates and rubs their feet... he even washes them. And his final word before they run back on the pitch is this, "Our new plan is to love one another. Just as I have loved you as the captain, you get to love each other. And everyone watching will know you are on my team if you love one another."

Now that seems silly. I mean it is a good message, but in the completely wrong context making this soccer team some weird hippie collective of hacky sack players. The scene is all wrong. But move the same characters to an upper room having the passover meal just before Jesus would head to the cross and it makes perfect sense, it fits and it changes everything.

The context, the scene we play out life in is vitally important otherwise it won't make sense. And fewer places is this true than in our text today. In Paul's instruction to this ragtag church with misplaced priorities, he puts forward that all of the miracles, all of the teaching and serving one another must happen in the context of love, a rich, sacrificial and abiding love for each other. This is our locker room and upper room.

Love is the scene of the Christian life.

1 Corinthians 13:1-7 "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] And 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. [3] If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

[4] Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant [5] or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; [6] it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. [7] Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

In the church in Corinth there has been tension over the use and pursuit of some spiritual gifts - abilities given by the Holy Spirit for believers. They had a habit of judging each other by the gifts they had and if you were missing one gift in particular then you were not as holy, not as significant in the church.

Paul then corrects the church by saying that gifts are given for the common good to all members of the church. None are more special than the others, those even that seem insignificant are indispensable. Gifts are revealed in variety in the church that functions in unity for the health and mission of the church.

Paul will shortly go on to zoom in to a couple of gifts and how they should be used in the worship of the church but here in our text he takes a brief poetic interlude to communicate something essential in the experience of gifts in the church, something essential for all of life as a believer really.

So the gifts and serving one another for the life of the church is good and corrective to our inclination to get it wrong, but all of it must be lived out in the midst of an underlying reality if it is to be worthwhile, effective and truly Christ-glorifying. Love must be central to the life of the church; every gift, experience, all worship, must happen in the scene of love or they are all pointless and a waste.

Paul presents the “still more excellent way” of love, the thing that is defining to the community of believers, to individuals’ identity in Christ, and the greatest of elements of life.

Here is the thing, like us, the church in Corinth has heard this same message a million times. It is central to the teaching of Jesus and it was the thing proclaimed at the founding of the church. This is not new information, but it is something that is a vital reminder for the church, even in our day where we form habits of clinging to our intellectual prowess over the mushiness of love... it is a call back to the basic.

It is meant to be our oxygen, our life and the ground of everything about us, the church and our expression of gifts. Our path today will walk right through the first half of the chapter; Love is necessary, Love defined, and Learning love (how do we get it and live it).

1) Love is Necessary

If I have eloquent speech and even the mysterious language of angels but have not love I am nothing but the annoying barking of dogs, a noise. If I have wisdom unsurpassed and can see things as they will be, if my faith shifts reality, but I don’t have love, I am lower than low, I am nothing. If I serve a million meals to the hungry and take a bullet for my friends but don’t have love... I don’t get anything, no gain.

These are strong words from Paul to the church. “The Corinthians clearly thought that the possessors of certain gifts were extremely important persons... not only are they unimportant, they are actually nothing.” The Corinthian dilemma is that they have spent a lot of time ranking expression and finding value in all sorts of things in the church so they can have a proper rank.

All that is shut down, all of these things you are meant to be about must be done in love for there to be value, for them to matter. Love is necessary for the Christian life. “Possession of charismata are not the sign of the Spirit, Christian love is.” *Fee*

Our approach might be different from the Corinthian experience but the rule still applies. We might value a certain Christian success, or maturity.

We might give more respect to those with a theological repertoire or book deals. And even some of us might be inclined to see some miraculous gifting as proof of spirituality. In all we say, know and do love must be the basis or it all means nothing.

We have to agree that these are all good things. Inspired language for the glory of Christ, prophetic vision, earth-moving faith and the sacrificial life. But for them to be Christian, for them to matter, they must be done in love. Otherwise they are all done in the wrong scene. They are done in the scene of self-improvement, or making up for guilt at our affluence. To build a reputation.

Like an artistic expression described as absurdism. Normal things put out of context in abnormal ways. Banksy. They are captivating because they expose strange human motivations and existence with a dark wrong-scene tilt.

These actions become Christian absurdism without love. “When spiritual gifts are exercised in love, not in a competitive spirit, the body of believers is edified.” So love is vital, necessary for the Christian community, for our lives together.

Okay Bible, if this love is essential, to the church, to gifts, to life itself, what is it?

2) Love Defined

If you were asked to define love not influenced by reading this text, I wonder what you would say. I don't think most people in our day would give a description that would come close to the poetic string that we have in 1 Corinthians.

“A second hand emotion...” Warm fuzzies. There is even a sense in our day that love is merely a label you can put on something in order to validate your experience or desire.

When asked what the American definition of love was, one friend of mine honestly replied: “Love is any feeling, effort, or passion that we can ultimately bend into the service of our idols.

By which I mean, I love my spouse so I can ultimately hold my marriage up as an offering to the idols of my own pride, my desire for comfort, my desire for approval. I love my children so I can eventually lay them on the altar of my own hopes, dreams, and self worth that I've invested in them. Love as the sinful heart practices is an expenditure that we ultimately hope will float back up as a pleasing fragrance to the false gods we worship.”

This is love as a transaction; if I give, it is in order to receive, making effort, speaking words and seeking passion in order to serve myself and get what I most desire.

“Barbara Fredrickson a professor of psychology has written Love 2.0, suggesting that love needs an upgrade. The old love is outmoded, and we need a new model. “Love is not exclusive.” “Love’s timescale is far shorter than we typically think. Love, as you’ll see, is not lasting.” “And perhaps most challenging of all, love is not unconditional.” “Love is a micro-moment of warmth and connection that you share with another living being.” Um

But when we say that love is the scene of the Christian life, it is not this. It is not a micro-moment of fleeting sensation, it is not an abusive transaction in order to gain... the love meant be expressed and experienced in Christian community is sacrificial and other-worldly, it goes beyond what most people think of and have encountered as love.

This love is patient and kind. It waits, I think patience has a gentleness to it, never hurried or abrupt but a longform experience that allows others to enter in. Kindness, it is caring and interested in the other.

It exists not to get what someone else has or to boast of having what others do not. There is not an arrogance to it, it is not abrasive and exclusionary. This love is not something that demands its rights, and it is resilient and not easily irritated.

This love is not resentful, it doesn’t hold a grudge and it doesn’t get “even.” It doesn’t enjoy “karma” coming around on those not loved...

Instead it rejoices with truth, proclaiming what is true as a way of celebration.

And above all this, love bears all things, it takes on the weight of the life of the other, it is the constant shoulder of support. It believes all things and hopes all things, Love believes the best of others and hopes the best for them.

This loves also endures everything that comes its way. It does not fade under the pressure of not getting its way.

This is amazing, this love. It is always funny to me that we would be inclined to read this at weddings - I mean the context is clearly Christian community - but this sets the bar so high. If a

groom and bride were actually listening during their wedding ceremony (which they don't!) this would be a horrible goal to be met... how long would it take to not live up to it?

Take even a longer view and evaluate your own marriage, there might be time some of these attributes of love existed but is this your normal posture? Put it in the right context - the church - the Christian experience and is it what truly defines it?

This love honestly seems impossible. But who can read this and not want it?!

“The beautiful thing that everyone longs for, perhaps more than anything in the world, looks to be out of reach - impossible really. But here's the strange thing: the very impossibility draws us back into it. It's almost what makes love so tantalizing, so enticing. It's like a game really. There's simply no way to get it right every time, but the fun of playing, the beauty of experiencing love, somehow manages to outweigh the real pain that everyone experiences in the absence of love.” Um

I can figure out some of the gifts, maybe even speak in tongues or at the least have a prayer language. I think I can go pretty far in prophecy and understanding the miraculous and maybe even the wisdom of God. I can muster up faith... at least a mustard seed size! And I know I can live generously, serving the needy, becoming the hero of the story... but can I love? Not in a sentimental way but as defined here?

Whether we can do it or not, this is the context of Christian community. This is how we are supposed to live. This is the script. Get to it.

If that is right, and I think it is, how then do we do it, how do we learn this love and give it?

3) Learning Love

I suppose I could come up with tremendously practical, self-motivated ways to do this. Tell you it will come if you work on it, if you set it as a goal and strive for it. I have a friend who would say that if he wants to love his car all he has to do is wash and wax it everyday and eventually he will love it - I suppose that was an image of loving God and other people - do it until it is real. That sounds awful to me... I would actually hate my car. So is there another way, other than forcing it, making it happen in our own strength?

It is fascinating that this description of our scene, of love in the community of believers, is smack in the middle of all this empowerment of the Spirit, of gifting beyond one's nature ability and we read this description of love and think through how we can do it ourselves!

The problem? We have located love within ourselves... As if I generate it and motivate it. I produce it... The cost of locating love within ourselves is that we have given it an expiration date or at least a long list of caveats that make it something far different than what is described here.

In reality, love happens outside of us. Love happens to us. Love is not words we say. It is not feelings we feel. It is not even deeds we do. It is something far bigger than all of that, and only this kind of love can redefine our lives.

We don't do this on our own, in our ingenuity and effort. Love is no human quality, but the gift of God himself.

This love can exist in the church, in our exercise of the gifts and in our mission together, in our lives, because it has been given, it has come to us in Jesus.

“Instead of hearing what we need to do for God, or even for others, we need to hear what love has done for us. This is God's posture toward us in all our brokenness. In love God is patient with the sinner. In love God is kind to us. In love God bears the believer upon his shoulders. In love God endures us in all of our unendurableness. We can't wear him out, and he's not backing down. His love never ends. The beautiful impossibility of love is a beautiful possibility in the hands of God.” Um

Some suggest reading this text and replacing “love” with “Jesus.” And that totally works it is true, but more than merely something Jesus accomplished it is something for us to live in as well because he accomplished it.

Jesus can tell his disciples and us that we will be known for our love for one another because he first loved us, he was patient and kind with us in our disobedience, our disregard for God. He lovingly held out his hand of grace, waiting for us, not rushing us... If anyone that has walked the earth has had the right to boast it was Jesus, yet he lived with humility, not insistent but accepting.

His message was truth and when he took on the cross in our place, he bore all things, all the weight of our sin and mocking, and in love he breathes his final breath declaring your freedom. Because of his resurrection he believes the best of you, because he is the best of you.

John 15:12-13 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. [13] Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (ESV)

Romans 5:6-8 “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. [7] For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—[8] but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (ESV)

Shown love to love, that not only would we experience it personally but give it corporately to each other in the church, as the body formed by the love of Christ for us.

When we see this love as a gift outside of us, we can live and give it because we trust the source to keep giving. We can become this love to each other come what may.

“Whatever happens, we hang on because it all has a purpose. God is chiselling out in us the image of his son, Jesus. Only love for God, released by his loves for us, can keep such faith and hope alive and in control of our daily lives. When we realize afresh that Jesus loves us in this way - he bears everything we throw at him, he still believes in us and is quietly confident for us, he has endured even the cross for us - then we take heart again and know that only his love can sustain us and make us the people, the local church, he wants us to become.”

1 John 4:7 “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.” (ESV)

We have been loved so that we can love. “It has already been borne; it has already been endured. Love faced death, and love won. All this time we’ve been playing the game of love as if our lives depended on it, while Jesus - love incarnate - has been trying to break in and say, “Love is dependant on my death. You get to live and love because I died in love, for love, for you, my love!” Um

Learning this love, living in this love is knowing this love. Being transformed by the love and allowing the Spirit of God to fill us with it over and over again.

“Only the love of God, keeping us in a deep experience of his complete acceptance of us as we are can enable us to face up to our self-centeredness, to renounce it and to look for light to shine in our inner darkness. In the love of God there is no place for asserting our rights, despising our gifts, envying our brothers and sisters, or treating them insensitively. Such love, in any case, turns us outwards to look to the needs and the interests of others: when we notice that our behavior or attitudes are damaging or offending another person, love propels us to deal with such inner darkness through the grace of the Lord. There is no local church anywhere which does not need more love for this very basic purpose.”

Colossians 3:12-14 “Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, [13] bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. [14] And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (ESV)

Love is the scene of the Christian life; we can live for love because Jesus lived in love for us, died in love for us and gives us life in him because of his love for us.

Realize the love - Go back to the simple and eternally profound truth that Jesus loves you. Believe in him. In Christ you are loved by God.

This week as part of Revision 2017 our prayer focus was on Spiritual Renewal and this is the scene of spiritual renewal, or our purpose and vision - the love of Christ for us. This is also the heart of our focus for the coming week, a deepening grip on our mission - knowing Jesus and making him known.

“Knowing God’s love for you enables you to love others. You can be free to lay fear aside and take risks for God. Pray that God would open your eyes to see your sin and confess and forsake it. God will enable you to live out the meaning of the law - to love God and love others. He will fill you with love and power to go and love others.” Jack Miller

Keep Trying - Show up, engage, trust God for the life of the church and community of believers, that you would give and experience this love. Ask for the filling of the Spirit to love. Hope for it, long for it and keep at it. **Romans 5:5** “hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (ESV)

Oh that the Lord would make us lovers by his love. That the Spirit would breathe on us and pour this love into our heart.

Charles Wesley Hymn: *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*

1 Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down, fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown. Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art; visit us with thy salvation; enter every trembling heart.

2 Breathe, oh, breathe thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast; let us all in thee inherit; let us find the promised rest. Take away the love of sinning; Alpha and Omega be; end of faith, as its beginning, set our hearts at liberty.

3 Come, Almighty, to deliver, let us all thy life receive; suddenly return, and never, nevermore thy temples leave. Thee we would be always blessing, serve thee as thy hosts above, pray and praise thee without ceasing, glory in thy perfect love.

4 Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be; let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee: changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.