

That Four-Letter Word

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

When you hear the verse:

For God so loved the world He gave His only Son ...
what do you think of? How do you think of God's love?

- Do you think of it as a feeling-type thing – God had some nice warm feelings in the pit of His stomach? If so, what do you think caused those feelings?
 - Something in the world was so lovable that God simply couldn't help Himself?
 - Or something in the nature and character of God caused those feelings?
- Or do you think of God's love not so much in terms of feelings, but in terms of how He acted – that His love is shown in giving His Son?
- Do you think it's a combination of the two?
- Is there some third possibility? Fourth possibility?

What is God's love? How do you define it? It's a tough question.

When you watch a movie and see a man say to a woman: "I love you" – what do you think he means?

- I find you physically attractive and want to get into bed with you as soon as possible.
- I've got something I want you to do for me and I want to manipulate you into doing it.
- I find your personality attractive and you're the sort of woman I think it would be beneficial for me to share my life with.
- I've come to realise how important you are to me and my well-being and I won't survive without you.
- I want to serve you for the rest of my life.

They're all possibilities, aren't they? OK, maybe the last

one doesn't get much of a look in at the movies. What do we mean by *love*?

The Context

Paul introduces the subject matter of what we now call 1 Corinthians 13 with these words:

But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

The point is: this chapter about *love* comes in the middle of a discussion about *spirituality* and *spiritual gifts*. Now it's possible Paul went off on a total tangent for this chapter and then came back to his subject, but I think that's unlikely. Rather, what he says here about *love* is part of his broader argument about *spirituality*. He wants them to see *the most excellent way* – the way of *love*.

- In their spirituality, he wants them to focus on that.
- In their use of gifts, he wants them to focus on that.

The Corinthians base their evaluation of people's spirituality on the different gifts they have.

- You've got the gift of helps. That's nice, but it's not very impressive, is it? There's nothing obviously spectacular or spiritual in that, is there? I think we'll rank you about a 3 in terms of spirituality.
- You've got the gift of tongues, have you? That's obviously in the supernatural realm, isn't it? You must be a rather spiritual person. I think we'll give you an 8 – maybe even an 8½.

Paul disagrees with how they evaluate people's spirituality. They focus on the wrong things. Spiritual gifts are simply gifts from God. God doesn't give them out on the basis of how spiritual a person is. They don't indicate a person's progress in the spiritual life. They aren't earned

by getting a certain number of spiritual frequent flyer points. God gives them out as He sees fit. There's something more important – more foundational and basic to our Christian lives. And that's what chapter 13 describes.

Now, that isn't to say spiritual gifts aren't important. They're still gifts from God. They're still important as people minister to others. They're still to be used for their God-given purposes. Paul discusses them in chapters 12 and 14. But what he says in this chapter is the most excellent way. This is basic to the church as a whole. This is basic to how spiritual gifts are used.

The Necessity of Love

Thus, he begins chapter 13 by telling us of the necessity for love. It doesn't matter what your spiritual gift – no matter how spectacular – if you're missing love, then you are nothing. Paul uses four examples in verses 1 and 2:

- if I speak with the tongues of men and angels;
- if I have prophetic powers;
- if I understand all mysteries and all knowledge; and
- if I have faith that can move mountains.

They're each different spiritual gifts people may have. In this context, each is probably in the realm of the obviously supernatural. On the Corinthians' scale of evaluating the spirituality of people, these are in the higher distinction range. For the Corinthians, there's no question that these are very spiritual people.

Yet, says Paul, if I do these things, but don't have love, I'm nothing. Please note – he doesn't say: "My use of the gift is nothing"; he says: "I'm nothing". That's how fundamental love is. No matter how exalted my spiritual gift may be, without love I'm nothing.

Paul then provides two other examples in verse 3 not specifically related to spiritual gifts.

- if I give away all I have; and
- if I give my body to be burned.

We look at them and ask: how's it possible to do them without love. Surely they're loving actions by definition.

But it is possible to do both without love. For example, why do people give to charity?

- Some do it for the tax deduction.
- Some out of a sense of duty.
- Some think God will reward them.
- Some because they want a reputation for generosity
- Some to get rid of the person at their door.
- Some because they can't say no to any child who asks them to sponsor them in the latest a-thon.

How much of it comes from love?

Is it different with giving my body? Think of suicide bombers. These people give their bodies. When they go on their missions, they expect to die. Do they give their bodies out of love?

- Certainly, they don't love the people they seek to destroy. For them, they have only hatred.
- Are they motivated by love for their own people? Perhaps. They may think their actions will bring freedom and better lifestyles for their families. In time, their families will get over the loss of a son.
- Are they motivated by love for Allah? Love does not seem to feature very prominently in Moslem religion – so that's unlikely.
- Most likely they're motivated by the promised reward. They're guaranteed entry into paradise along

with a harem of beautiful women. And that comes closer to selfishness.

The overall point remains crystal clear. Love is central to Christian spirituality.

- You can have the most spectacular spiritual gifts.
- You can do the most spectacular spiritual deeds.

In themselves, they aren't signs of your spirituality. Be careful you don't get so distracted by the spectacular that you overlook what's important.

It's often the same today. What's your test of spirituality?

- Some still go for the supernatural gifts as the obvious evidence – speaking in tongues, healing people, performing miracles.
- Some have moved to the intellectual realm as their test – the really spiritual person has the most theological knowledge. That's why we send them to college – so they can become really spiritual.
- Some test spirituality by the style of worship and how well people fit that style – for some the style is formal and awe-inspiring; for others it is exuberant and charismatic.
- Some test spirituality by a person's prayer life – how many hours you spend in prayer. It becomes a quantitative thing.
- Some test it by the sort of aura a person emits. You can really sense they're a very spiritual person.

And so the possible tests people devise multiply.

That's not what Paul says, is it? Now, many of these other things are good things. Paul doesn't say otherwise. Yet, they aren't the benchmark for spirituality.

- You can have a so-called spiritual gift and not even

be a Christian. I'm told many witchdoctors round the world can speak in tongues.

- And you can be a Christian without having a certain spiritual gift. There is no one gift given to all Christians.

Yet, love is a necessity. It's part of being a Christian. Jesus said the same in John 13:34-35

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.

More important than the manifestations of the Spirit are the graces of the Spirit – or the fruit of the Spirit. My character is a much more important gauge of my spirituality than my abilities or my giftedness.

The Nature of Love

In verses 4 to 7, Paul describes what love's like. It isn't so much a theoretical definition of what love is as a practical description of how love behaves.

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

There are some feeling-type words in there, but most of the words focus on how love behaves rather than how love feels. It isn't some form of sentimentality.

What is it about Christian love that's distinctive? I want to quote a lengthy paragraph from Don Carson.

If I must say in few words what is distinctive about God's love for us, it is that it is self-originating. When

a young man reveals his heart with a passionate declaration, "I love you!" at least in part he means that he finds the woman he loves lovely. At least some of his love is elicited by the object of that love. But God loves what is unlovely. If, as John 3:16 tells us, God loves the world, it is not because the world is so lovely God cannot help himself: judging by John's use of the term *world*, God loves the world only because of what *he* is. And derivatively, that is how Christians learn to love: they learn to love with love that is, like God's, self-originating. Of course, unlike God's love, ours is not *absolutely* self-originating; but it is self-originating in the sense that God's grace so transforms the believer that his or her responses of love emerge out of the matrix of Christian character, and are correspondingly less dependent on the loveliness of the object.¹

Who do you find it easy to love? Isn't it the ones you consider most lovable?

- The people with similar interests to you.
- The people in your same social class or above.
- The people our culture defines as lovable – those with the beautiful faces and the beautiful bodies.

That's a love that responds to something attractive in the other person. Whatever it is we find attractive gives us nice warm feelings towards that person.

That isn't what Paul talks about here. Paul refers to a quality in the person doing the loving that isn't really impacted by the lovableness of the person being loved.

- For example, Paul says love isn't irritable. Now, it doesn't matter how lovable a person is, they'll

¹ Don Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Sydney: Lancer, 1988) 65.

always have some irritating qualities. Something in them will push you towards being irritated. Yet, love is not irritable.

- Similarly, patience isn't generated by some quality in the person being loved. They may test your patience – tempt you to become impatient with them. But your response of patience or impatience isn't something external to you.

Another distinctive of Christian love is that it's centred outside itself. The quality originates in the person doing the loving, but focuses on the person loved. It isn't self-centred – it's other person centred. It isn't in it for what it can get out of it, but for what it can give.

As a teenager, I saw a movie dealing with dating and marriage. It was said:

Many people approach marriage as a 50/50 proposition – 50% give and 50% take. They think it's fair if they give in 50% of the time. The Christian ideal is 100% give. Both partners to the marriage should aim to give 100% of the time.

Now, I'm sure I don't have that quote exactly right after all these years – but I'm confident of the overall idea.

That's what this passage says. Love focuses on the good of its object – 100% of the time.

- Christian love doesn't refrain from being rude 50% of the time and then say: well, now I can be rude to you for the other 50% of the time.
- Christian love isn't kind for 50% of the time and then unkind for the other 50% because it's only fair to have a bit of give and take in any relationship.

Christian love seeks for the good of the other person

100% of the time.

Does that mean Christian love is somewhat wishy-washy – that it has no backbone to stand up to the other person? Does it mean Christian love just obeys every whim of the other person, seeking their happiness? No. Christian love seeks, not their *happiness*, but their *good* – and that's *good* as God defines it. There's a very big difference.

Suppose your friend boasts about what they got away with:

- They drove Bathurst to Penrith in 30 minutes.
- They left assets out of their pension application.
- They put in a false insurance claim.

Should you rejoice with them? Should you thank God they got away with it? Does love rejoice at evil?

How's a Christian history teacher love the students in her class? Does she simply give them what they want?

- They don't like dates or dusty books.
- They don't like assignments and tests.
- They do like games and videos.
- They do like parties.

Does Christian love simply give them what they want? No. Christian love seeks their ultimate good – not the satisfaction of their self-centred desires.

That's how the Corinthians should exercise their spiritual gifts. They're to use them with the focus on others and benefiting others. They aren't to use them with the purpose of bringing honour and glory to oneself.

The Permanence of Love

In the final verses, Paul gives another reason why love's

the most excellent way. Love is superior to the gifts, because, in the long run, it is love that lasts, and not the gifts.

Paul mentions three gifts here: prophecy, tongues and knowledge. In the perfection of eternity, each of these will either become irrelevant or else be swallowed up. But love will last forever – for love's part of the very character of God, and God calls us to be like Him. Love will continue in the relationships we share with God and one another for eternity.

Paul illustrates this truth in two ways:

- the growth from childhood into adulthood; and
- the improvement there is when you see the real thing as compared to a reflection (remembering that mirrors then were a pale reflection of what mirrors are today)

Love will remain into eternity. It will last. This is the evidence that God's Spirit is truly at work. This is the true miracle: that someone as self-centred as me could act lovingly to others. Here is the test of true spirituality.

Now, I haven't spent much time on these last few verses. And you may be conscious that some people argue rather strongly about these verses – especially as to whether certain spiritual gifts are still available today. It's OK to have that discussion – but it isn't the main focus of this passage. And the way some people have the discussion distracts from the overall thrust of this chapter. Indeed, some people conduct their discussions about this in a way that shows they've missed the whole point. They forget to check whether they discuss things lovingly.

The Challenge

This chapter challenges us at the level of our loving. How does our love measure up?

- If I truly love you, why do I still get impatient with you?
- If I truly love you, why do I still sometimes act towards you in an unkind way?
- If I truly love you, why do I still want to boast about myself towards you?
- If I truly love you, why do I envy your spiritual gifts or your nice house or your great job?

How much is our love self-centredness in disguise? When I go out of my way to help you, that really looks like a loving action. But what's my real motivation?

- I want you to think me a nice person?
- I want to impress someone else so I can get some advantage from them?
- I hope you'll tell others how nice I am?
- I hope to impress God and get some reward?
- It's part of my job?
- I knew you expected it and I just can't say "no" to other people's expectations?
- I was bored and had nothing better to do?
- I thought it would make me more spiritual?

Was my real motivation to help you – or was I really acting from a form a selfishness?

This chapter challenges us at another level as well – in relation to our whole thinking about spirituality. One of the Corinthians' problems was that they used these spiritual gifts – these differences amongst them – to rank themselves in terms of spirituality. They competed with one another for the top honours. This chapter on love

undermines their whole system?

- If I'm truly loving, won't I focus on you rather than me?
- If I'm truly loving, won't I look out for your good rather than compete with you for the honour of being the top Christian?
- If I'm truly loving, won't I seek for your honour rather than boast about my own achievements?

It'd be possible to take this chapter on love and begin a new spiritual competition – let's see who can love the best. I don't think that's Paul's intention. Certainly, he wants them to love – but to have a love competition puts the focus back on self. It becomes a contradiction in terms. It would undermine the unity of the body.

And isn't that also the focus of the gospel? The message of the gospel is one of grace – God's free and totally undeserved gift of life. There's no competition for that. It's freely available to all. It's equally available to all. We can't rank ourselves as being more deserving of grace than the person sitting next to us. And it's God's grace to us that enables us to love others. Grace moves us away from being self-centred. We love because He first loved us.