

# 1 Corinthians 12.31 - 13.13

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## *Loving truly*

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 31 October 2021

Seeing the Son [6]

### **Love is...**

What is love? If you listen to music, love is... all around, love is... a song, love is... real, love is... wanting to be loved, love is... pain, love is... a losing game, love is... vengeance, love is... an open door... and, of course, love is... all you need.

Whatever else love *is*, it has certainly inspired a lot of song lyrics.

I don't know if they still do, but food and drink companies used to run competitions where you had to complete the sentence to win a crate of whatever it was: 'I love Shreddies because...' or 'Galaxy chocolate is the best because...' well, it just is. Although I'm probably not supposed to say that now I live a mile from Cadbury World. At first they sound easy, but then you start to think, and realise it's not so simple.

Love is...

## Love is... the most excellent way (12.31)

Today is the last in our series *Seeing the Son*, looking at the first four chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Except: the sharp ones among you will have noticed that chapter 13 is not one of the first four chapters..!

We are ending with chapter 13 because I think it summarises the key point Paul is trying to teach the Corinthians, **the most excellent way** he mentions in 12.31.

We've seen how the Corinthians were tearing themselves apart by arguing about who was the best leader, the best preacher, with the cleverest teaching and the most impressive oratory. In human terms they were a hugely successful church, with plenty of people, plenty of money, and plenty going on.

But they had drifted away from their anchor, they had lost sight of their core, their centre: Jesus. Time after time after time, Paul tells the Corinthians: see the Son, look to the message of the cross, live by his Spirit, listen to his teaching, live like Jesus.

Given that it may seem strange to be ending our series *Seeing the Son* with a passage that doesn't mention Jesus once.

Except, of course, it does.

## Love is... what matters (13.1-3)

Jess and I were away last week in Pembrokeshire, and spent most of the week walking along different sections of the coast path. It was beautiful – except for one bit where for a couple of miles there was a barbed-wire fence on our left and a ten-foot high hedge on our right. When Jess proof-read this she burst out laughing and pointed out it was actually six feet high, but it ruining the view had made me so grumpy I must have added the extra four feet in my mind (!).

I knew there was a beautiful, rugged coastline, because I could hear the waves crashing against it. As I said – *several* times – ‘What’s the point in being here if I can’t even see the sea?’

Being able to go on holiday with my lovely wife, being out in the fresh air getting some much-needed exercise, they are good things to be enjoyed.

But at the same time, there *was* something missing. We love the sea – so we went *there* to be on the coast and see the sea. I find the sea calming. Even when waves are crashing there’s something about the sheer size and scale of it that lifts up my eyes and brings me peace.

Paul lists several good things here.

1. **If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels** (1): he means both human languages and the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues.
2. **If I have the gift of prophecy** (2): most of the time prophecy is not about predicting the future, but reminding God's people of God's Word, and calling them to live lives of holiness.
3. **If I have a faith that can move mountains** (2): it's not about having a large enough amount of faith so that you can move mountains, but the one *in whom* we have faith: the God who can move mountains.
4. **If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship** (3): being generous to the point of sacrifice is a good thing, though not an easy thing.

Friends, *these are all good things*. And yet, without love, we may as well be a **clanging cymbal** (1), without love we are **nothing** (2) and **gain nothing** (3) – without love, we may as well not bother.

Doing these things without love is like doing a coast walk when you can't see the sea – they're good things to do, but they are missing the main thing: love.

## Love is... impossible (13.4-7)

Does it surprise you to read Paul defining ‘love’? Surely we all know what love is! I’m not so certain.

Sure, we all know the pale imitation that passes for love – but *real* love, *true* love (which has nothing to do with Hollywood by the way) – I think that’s something about which we need to be *told*.

Hear what Paul says:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, 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.

*1 Corinthians 13.4-7 (NIV)*

I know this passage is often chosen at weddings, but it is about far more than the love between husband and wife – it describes the way in which God calls us to love, *full stop*: friends, family, Christian brothers and sisters, enemies, those who are different...

If this were a tick-list or a score sheet – how would your love do?

To be honest, if this is what love is, then I'm not sure I love my wife Jess. Am I always patient? Absolutely not. Am I always kind? Most of the time I hope, but sometimes I can be nasty. Do I get easily angered? Yes, though not usually by her – she normally bears the brunt of it when I get angry at other people. Do I get jealous of the time she spends at work? Yes. Am I selfish? Often.

Oh dear.

My score sheet isn't looking so great! I wonder what *your* score sheet looks like? Given I regularly fail on at least half of these, does that mean I don't love Jess? What's going on here?

## **Love is... a reflection (13.8-12)**

Thank God for verses 9 and 12:

For we know in part...

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror...

*1 Corinthians 13.9 & 12 (NIV)*

It's important here to realise that for Paul, mirrors were different. For us, mirrors are effectively perfect, hence the phrase 'mirror image'. In computing, a 'mirror' is an exact copy of the original.

But for Paul, mirrors were different. They were usually polished metal. They were not perfectly flat, and they did not give a perfect image. In fact in Paul's day people didn't *really* know what they looked like. Imagine telling that to a 21<sup>st</sup> century teenager.

If you hold a mirror to your own love, or the love of others for you, don't expect to see an exact reflection of what Paul describes here. Expect to see something *like* 1 Corinthians 13, recognisable *as* what Paul describes, but falling short.

Our brokenness and hurt and sin are like the imperfections of a bronze mirror; we still reflect God and his love, but not perfectly like this. I'm a perfectionist so I find that hard – but it is also encouraging because it means perhaps I *do* love Jess after all (!).

For me one of the hardest things about being a Christian is that I constantly fail to imitate Jesus. I wish that I could be a perfect mirror, reflecting all of Jesus to everyone.

But neither do I reflect *nothing* of Jesus. Imperfect though they are, bronze mirrors *do* show an image, they do reflect *something* – and that is all God asks of us.

For, although God requires perfection, he doesn't require it from *us*; someone has already met that bar for us.

## Love is... Jesus

You see, Paul was not writing an abstract essay here; he was describing a person. And because we are in church you all know the answer: Jesus! Swap the word 'love' in this passage for 'Jesus' and you'll see that actually, without using the word 'Jesus', this passage is all about *him*.

Jesus is not a bronze mirror, he's a perfect reflection, the exact imprint of God's being: he *does* reflect God and his love perfectly.

Jesus alone is perfect love, because Jesus alone gave everything – even his very life – for love. God loved the world *in this way*: he sent his Son to die in our place, to bring forgiveness and new life to all those who repent and put their trust in him. In Jesus God shows us the depths to which his love will go to find us, and to bring us home.

So to win the 'competition', the prize for which is everlasting life, we simply need to complete the phrase, 'Love is... *Jesus*.' He alone is true love, so he alone shows us what it looks like to love truly.