

Sunday, 31 January 2016

[all you need is Love... what is it? 1 Cor 13](#)

At the University of Lethbridge I used to meet with a group of students and teach different methods of prayer. One week I met with them and I used 1 Corinthians 13 to help us enter into prayer. First, I asked them to read the chapter and understand what it was saying. We read it out loud then sat in silence as they re-read it privately to themselves- internalizing it. Then after a few minutes I asked them to replace the word “love” with their name in versus 4-7. So where it says, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” It then became, “[Chris] is patient; [Chris] is kind; [Chris] is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. [Chris] does not insist on [his] own way; [he] is not irritable or resentful; [he] does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. [he] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” We then sat in silence meditating on our lives as compared to 1 Corinthians 13. I asked them to notice where it felt comfortable, and where it felt uncomfortable, and then to talk to God about what they were feeling. It’s a humbling experience. No one comes away feeling like they don’t have areas of their life they need to work on.

One student rebelled against my directions. She said, “I can’t see myself that way, so I inserted Jesus’ name instead”. She had a

point. This is a more profound kind of love than I can pull out of myself. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was preaching on this passage and said, “Who is this love- if it is not he who bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things- and indeed, had to endure all things, all the way to the cross? Who was never looking for his own gain, never became bitter, and never kept count of the evil done to him- and thus was overpowered by evil? Who even prayed for his enemies on the cross [Lk 23:34] and thereby totally overcame evil? Who is this love, which Paul was talking about, other than Jesus Christ himself? Who else could it be, if not he? What better symbol could there be, standing over this entire passage, than the cross?” (What Love Wants- London, Oct 21, 1934).

So the rebellious university student that refused to follow my directions had a point- little did she know she had Bonhoeffer to back her up. Yes, this is a profound kind of love. It is a love that we cannot come to on our own. It is a love that has to arise in us from somewhere outside us. It has to be inserted in us by Jesus.

Yes, this is the love of Jesus- or rather- Jesus himself. But, this doesn't get us off the hook. This is a letter written to a real group of Christians. This was a group of Christians living in a real city called Corinth. It was a busy city and it was a recently rebuilt city. It had the feel of a boom town. There was lots of trade and lots of cultures mixing and mingling. Lots of competition. Lots of new ideas, and religions. It was also known as a place where the people were pretty relaxed with their sexual morals. In many ways, it's a lot like the culture we're living in. ... The Corinthian church was dealing with some strong egos among some of their members. There was competition about

who was more “spiritual”. Some who had gifts that were less obvious or considered less valuable were overlooked. Paul was writing to address some of these issues.

As much as my student friend and Bonhoeffer see the love of Jesus here, Paul was also writing this letter in the hopes that this kind of love would be seen in the Corinthian Christians. Paul wasn't writing this so they could admire the love of Jesus from a distance, but so they could manifest this love in their church... because, by the Holy Spirit, Christ was in them. This love is what they need to correct their issues.

First, Paul starts by describing how important this love is. I might have the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, and might seem very impressive to people around me, and might be considered a very “spiritual” person. But, if I don't have love, then I'm just a noise-maker. I'm just making meaningless sound. I might have prophetic powers, revealing the will of God and the deepest mysteries of reality in a profound way, but if I don't have love, I'm nothing. It's pointless. If I have all kinds of trust in God, so that I never worry about the future and no obstacle seems too big, if I have that kind of faith, but I don't have love, I'm nothing. It doesn't mean anything. I could do amazing acts of charity. I could give everything I own away to the poor, but if I do it out of self-love to puff myself up and make myself feel like an important person in other people's eyes, rather than out of love for God and my neighbour, then it's for nothing. It's pointless. I gain nothing. I could even offer my body. I could give my life protecting someone, or I could give up my life as a martyr for refusing to deny Christ, but if I do it for any reason but love, then it was for nothing. Paul is saying that the only

thing that makes anything valuable in an eternal sense is love. ... So how important is love? Paul says it is really the only thing that is important. Every achievement that we think is important, if it isn't at its root about love, then it is just dust in the wind. It will all end up in the grave.

What do we think is important and impressive? A prestigious position- I could become the prime minister. Or maybe some important academic- maybe I win a Nobel Prize for physics or medicine. Or maybe I'm the most beautiful, or maybe I'm famous and on TV. Maybe I start a charity and drill wells for thirsty people in third world countries. Paul says it's all pointless without love. With love it is all worth something. And we could make the argument in reverse. I could do the most menial task- I could clean the toilet- and if love is present in that action, then it has eternal significance.

This isn't any ordinary kind of love. We use that word in a lot of different ways. I love my wife. I love my children. I love pizza. I love hiking. I love books. Do I really mean the same thing when I use the word "love" in all those statements? Other languages have multiple words for love, and we use just the one. When Paul speaks about "love" he is speaking about what John was speaking about when he said that "God is Love" (1 Jn 4:8). Love incarnate is what Bonhoeffer was talking about when he called Christ that love. This is the love we meet on the cross. It is the love we see in Paul's letter to the Philippians where it says Jesus "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:7). It is a love that selflessly serves the beloved.

But what does this love look like in daily life? Next, Paul talks

about what this love looks like on the ground. He wants us to be able to spot it. He wants us to yearn for it in ourselves. This love is outward facing. It is all about respect and concern for the other. He says love is patient. It doesn't rush. It can wait a very very long time. It doesn't force anyone before they are ready. Even when it seems pointless, love keeps on. Love is kind. Not in a passive sense, but in actively showing kindness.

Paul also tells us what love doesn't look like. Love is not selfish the way envy is, or boasting is, or the way arrogance is, or the way rudeness is. All that is in some way about self-obsession- it is service to the self rather than the other. Insisting on your own way, irritability (overreacting, being easily offended), and resentment or bitterness... it's self-obsession- it is serving the self rather than the other. Self-interest and self-centeredness is exactly the opposite of what Paul is aiming at. We can call something "love" that is really an attempt to control the other person for our own self-gratification. A lot of what we call love is really polluted by manipulation and control and does not reflect the character of Christ who "did not please himself" (Rom 15:3).

In verse 7 we see a list of "all things"- it bears the unbearable. It doesn't look away from the pain, the sin, or the disaster. Bonhoeffer says, "love is still greater than the greatest guilt". It believes all things. Doesn't that mean we will be lied to by people, and be taken for fools? Out of love, yes, we will sometimes. We listen thinking the best of the person in front of us. It has been said that attentively listening to someone looks almost exactly like loving someone. Sometimes out of love we will believe the unbelievable. This doesn't mean we believe lies

about God, or we don't worry about truth, but when we are listening to the person in front of us, we listen like they are telling the absolute truth. We listen in a way that our love for them is more important than evaluating the truth or falsity of what they are saying. One sociologist said that young men are looking for an unshockable friend. A friend they could tell anything and they wouldn't abandon them. Love hopes all things and endures all things- it never gives up on anyone even if we look like fools. In the end, love is never wasted.

I know lists can be sort of difficult to listen to, but just remember the core of what he is saying. As we hold all these together all at once we see that the love he is really talking about expresses itself in respect and concern for the other. What we often mean by love is a warm positive feeling towards the other person. That's not what Paul is talking about here. It is an active respect for the other person so we don't speak or even think negatively about the other. It is an active concern for the other person to be well.

Like my rebellious university friend you might be saying to yourself, "but, I can't love like this". It's too hard. It leaves me too vulnerable to being taken advantage of. You're right. You can't love like this. Only Christ in you can love like this. ... He will teach us how to do this. Don't start with trying to love the most evil person you can imagine. Start with loving a person that slightly annoys you- the neighbor with the noisy dog. Start small and Christ in you will build your capacity to love. This isn't something we should put off as "sissy stuff" or "too hard". If Paul is right, what we put love into is the only things that will have any eternal significance. According to Paul, from an

eternal perspective, training ourselves to love is the most important thing we can do. Whatever we do in love lasts into eternity. Whatever we do without love ultimately means nothing. For Paul, a wasted life is a life with a lack of love.

It is only possible for us to love this way because he first loved us (1 Jn 4:19). When we see that God is love, and we see that God loved us so powerfully and profoundly- when we receive that love- then we can love truly. Or maybe it's better to say, we can allow that love to flow through us. True love does not look into another person to find something lovable. True love flows through us from God into the world.

In everything we do, may we be motivated by that Love that first loved us. May you feel that Love course through your veins, until holding it back becomes painful. May the love that fills you pour out into the world and transform it because God is loving the world through you.