

God is love

1 John 4:16-19 & 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Without love...

It is not difficult to work out why Christianity has such a lousy reputation. Look through history and you will find many a disgraceful episode. Why just this week the Vatican published a new list of seven deadly sins one of which was the possession of too much wealth. Bearing in mind the massive riches of the Vatican itself, this would be funny if it were not tragic hypocrisy. Much of the world's ridicule is deserved because we have so frequently missed the point. What is the point? The point is love.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Without love, worship is just noise and din¹.

Without love, Spirit-driven preaching (which is what the gift of prophecy amounts to) is just hellfire and brimstone.

Without love, knowledge just breeds snobbery, cynicism of others less informed than you and contempt for them. Knowledge should nourish the heart but without love it rots the soul.

Without love, faith breeds extremism and, ultimately, terrorism: think of fundamentalist Islamists today who are saying, "If they don't believe what we believe, then they must die!" Never forget that fundamentalist Christians can be just as bad – without love.

Without love, even a life of sacrifice will only nurture spiritual pride and one-upmanship.

Without love, every Christian activity, is a worthless exercise and gains us... (quite literally) 'nothing', 'nothing'.

Do not lose the plot. The plot is... love. But what is love?

¹ In pagan Greece, the worship of Dionysus and Cybele were accompanied by gongs and cymbals, Paul is telling the Corinthians that loveless Christians are really no different from pagans.

The truth about love

A couple of years ago a Christian Psychiatrist called David Brenner started asking people a simple question: “Imagine that God is thinking about you, what do you think he feels when you come into his mind?” This is what he found:

“When I ask people to do this, a surprising number of people say that the first thing they assume God feels is disappointment. Others assume that God feels anger. In both cases, these people are convinced that it is their sin that first catches God’s attention.”

To many of us, God is like a strict headmaster in the old days when they could still use the cane. He scowls at us, and nothing we can achieve will ever be good enough for him. So we wait, trembling outside his study until he summons us to enter!

Would you believe me if I told you that when God looks at you he feels overwhelming love? Your sins and failures are not the first thing he sees. How could that be true if “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”? How can he love the people who have, in effect, told him to get out of his own universe? In his first letter John tells us that “God is love” (**1 John 4:16-19**) – John says that we do not need to be afraid of our moment in the headmasters study, that we can face him with confidence. He knows this because “God is love”.

We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in him. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world. Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of judgment, and this shows that his love has not been perfected in us. We love each other as a result of his having loved us first.

What does it mean to say “God is love”? In **1 Corinthians 13** Paul attempted to describe what love is like; what love looks like in action. We are going to tweak the text a little – if “God is love” then this passage describes God for us. Let’s see if it works:

God is patient and kind. God is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. He does not demand His own way. He is not irritable, and he keeps no record of being wronged. He does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. God never gives up, never loses faith, he is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

When God looks at you, whoever you are and whatever you have done, the first thing that he feels is his love for you. And God's love is not just a feeling, a romantic sentiment we can sing about, his love is active and real and this is what it looks like.

Love is...

First, he is patient – and this means specifically patient with people rather than things or circumstances. He does not drop us from his affections because he is irritated or bored with us or cause our progress is slow.

Then he is kind – this is amazing; again and again you see God doing good things for bad people for no reason at all! His blessing is not linked to our performance! I heard a preacher say recently that if we want one hour of blessing we must pray for one hour; “One hour of prayer earns one hour of blessing”. This is wrong, because God does not function like an official at the department of pensions, parsimoniously calculating our income to the penny on the basis of the contributions we have made! He is overwhelmingly kind to us.

There is a wonderful old hymn that puts this over well; “There's a wideness in God's mercy” let me quote you two verses:

*For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of man's mind
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind*

*But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own*

You get the point of this don't you? Prayer is so important, but God's kindness gives us weeks of blessing even when our prayers are not up to the job.

But how could God ever be jealous (4), what would he have to be jealous of? Never forget that we often project our own emotions on to God. Envy is instinctive for human beings; it can become a mind-set that begrudges others their good fortune and prosperity. We would hold them back if we could. So we sometimes imagine that God is as mean-spirited as we are and that he will hurt us out of spite – well he won't!

Then he is not boastful or proud. You see this when you look at Jesus, teaching about the Father's greatness, inviting people to become part of the Kingdom of God, but actually saying very little about himself! He was not,

it seems, into self-promotion! He left it to others to work out that he was the Messiah. The glory he got, he earned as others worked out what was really going on and who was walking in their midst.

An aristocratic gentleman wanted to put-down William Carey² on his arrival in India. “I believe, My Carey, that you are a shoemaker?” he sniffed. “Er, No sir,” Carey said, “Just a cobbler, I cannot make shoes, I only repair them”. Self-importance and humility in one conversation! You see this in Jesus’ life, his avoidance of the great and the good and his preference for the poor, his lack of pretentiousness, his common touch. You may have a low opinion of yourself, but God is not proud, he is not above associating with the likes of you... even if others think twice!

And God is not rude. If you have an Antique Version this little phrase is translated, “Love doth not behave itself unseemly” – it is quaint, and it is spot on! Some people are blunt and brutal; they must always have their say and have their way. They don’t care how they behave or who gets hurt in the process. Love always chooses the right way to behave, the right words, the right actions. It is hard to believe, but God is like this, he respects you, and will always deal with us in exactly the right way. You get this in John’s portrait of Jesus in Revelation: In chapter nineteen he is the commander of the armies of Israel, leading the charge on his white horse and terrifying those who are ripe for judgment. Yet in chapter three he says to you, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” Oh, yes, he may knock down the occasional door but in general, love is not rude!

Love does not demand its own way – One of the things you observe within the Trinity is that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are set on glorifying one-another and not themselves. This is the hidden secret of Christian love – seek the good of others and you will discover your own good.

God is not irritable – maybe this is why we have our mental image of God the Headmaster, waiting in the study with his cane. We imagine his flying off the handle like a teacher in a bad mood, over-reacting to some trivial problem. But God’s wrath is always measured and predictable: is always rightly angry, to the right intensity, for the right reasons, and he gets there very slowly. Love is not irritable!

God does not delight in evil (“He is never glad about injustice” NLT). The backbone of our culture is a delight in evil, from the exaltation of degenerate celebrities, our glorying in gossip, to the veneration of actual criminals as heroes. Love chooses instead to “rejoice when the truth wins out” (NLT). God is passionate about justice and truth.

² 1761 to 1834 – Carey founded the Baptist Missionary Society and spearheaded Christian mission in India.

But how can he love me when I justly deserve his anger, and my spiritual life is two steps forward and three steps back? How can he love me when I am spiritually cold and have almost given up on him? When God looks at me, how can he feel anything but disappointment, anger, disgust?

You get your answer in verse 7 – “God never gives up, he never loses faith in you, he is always hopeful and he keeps going no matter what!” When I was at school I had a friend who was mad about cars and spent most of his spare time dismantling and re-building old crocks in his dad’s back yard. One day I went to his house after school and he was working on an Old 1954 Morris Minor convertible – a real heap of junk! His friends were contemptuous, but whenever Derek looked at that car there was a far away glaze in his eyes... a mixture of love and hope, a dream of what could be. “How much did it cost?” I asked, “Fifteen quid!” he replied. “You were ripped off!”

It took six months for Derek to work his magic on that car, and when he finished it was better than new. Everyone was jealous, but Derek had fulfilled his dream!

God looks at you the way that Derek once looked at that old car – he has a dream for your life, he believes that you can achieve it and he is committed to getting you there. He will never give up on you, never lose faith in you, his hope for you is always alive and he will always keep going, no matter what!

Did I miss something?

If you are alert, you may notice that I missed something out; “Love keeps no record of wrongs” (5). It is easy to spot why I left it out, because the Headmaster does keep a record, on his desk is a piece of paper with my name at the top and a long list of my dismal failures and shortcomings. I am waiting outside his office, and one day I will be summoned inside to give an account of myself. Things are not looking good!

Now here is the wonderful reality: the record he keeps is now cancelled. Look at **Colossians 2:13-15** where Paul imagines Christ’s crucifixion. Nailed to the cross above his head was the charge sheet or *titulus* which proclaimed the crimes the crucified man was paying for. Now he imagines your charge-sheet, the record of your wrongs, nailed to Christ’s cross above his head – as though he was dying for them! He *was* dying for them, dying for *you*. Now that record of wrongs is wiped out – because he loves you he keeps no record of your wrongs.

That sheet of paper on the headmaster’s desk is blank.

So God looks at you with a far away look in his eyes, when he looks at you he sees what you are going to become, when he is finished with you. Just like my friend Derek, he paid for you , a very high price indeed.

God is love

So this is what it means to say that God is love. Here is John again:

We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in him. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world. Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of judgment, and this shows that his love has not been perfected in us. We love each other as a result of his having loved us first.

If this is what God is like, God calls us to be like him too (16b). We are to learn to love in three directions: love for God, the people of God and those who are not yet the people of God. As we grow in our love we grow closer to God. Remember the idea of *perichoraisis* from last week? This is how our roots grow into God's and we become one. As we live in him our love grows more perfect – because it is drawing on his love.

Love expels the fear of judgment – at least, I hope it has done! You came in this morning expecting to have to face an angry headmaster and now you know that God loves you. His perfect love means that there is no need for fear.

Knowing that he loves you means that you can trust him (16). Jesus once told a very strange story about asking a father for an egg and getting a scorpion, or for a fish and they got a snake. Deep inside our heads there is a fear that if we trust God, follow him in everything, surrender all we have to him, he is going to make us miserable! Jesus says you can trust the Father: “So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” **(Luke 11:13)**

You can trust him!