

The Loving Church

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[0 : 00] Pardon me. So, 1154 New Church Bibles, in case you all can't see on the screen. And 1 Corinthians 13. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have 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 do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonor 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.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease. Where there are tongues, they will be stilled. Where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

[1 : 13] For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child.

I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror.

Then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part. Then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain.

Faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love. The word of God. Thanks, Josh, for reading. And if you could keep your Bibles open there, that would be a great help. And there's an outline inside the notice sheet. If you'd find that useful. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help.

[2 : 14] Father God, we praise you. That you are a God of love. Eternal love. Father, Son, and Spirit. A love that overflowed into making us and redeeming us.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, that you would, out of love for you, move us to be attentive to your word to us this evening. And give us hearts that are willing to change and follow you.

For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen. So this is week three of this series we're having at St Silas, The Living Church. There's two reasons why we're having this series. Okay, the first one was that as a staff team, over the last few months before the summer, we read this book that's written for people in Christian leadership.

It's called God's Leader by Andy Mason. But as we read it, we felt that not only was it a really good book for us thinking about leadership, but actually it was a good book for any church to think about the themes together as the passages in the book brought us to think, well, what kind of church does God call us to be?

So we're kind of working through the themes of that book, God's Leader by Andy Mason. And the second reason why we're having this series now is because when you look at where we are as a church, we basically have a real moment of opportunity with our evening service, in that for a year or so now, or perhaps longer, there's been a bit of a buzz about our morning service.

[3 : 40] But our evening is smaller in number, and yet demographically in the West End of Glasgow, an evening service time would suit a lot of people if they were interested in coming back to church or they were interested in coming for the first time.

An evening service time is a good time to come to church. But almost like when you set out planting a church and you think, well, what kind of church do we want to be? What is God calling us to be?

It's good to think that as a service, think for an evening service like this, what kind of community do we want to be? And what is God calling us to be? So that's the kind of opportunity that we have and the chance to ask these big picture questions.

So we're hearing the Holy Spirit call us to a set of foundations for church life together. And two weeks ago, it was about being a cross-centered church and recognizing that fundamentally, the way on in the Christian life and the way on as a church is the same as the way into the Christian life.

You never move on from seeing your need for the cross, that we can't atone for our sin, that God is delighted to atone for our sin, and that nothing more is needed to atone for our sin.

[4 : 52] And that's the great need of the people around us. And it goes on being our great need and therefore a source of great comfort to us as a church family that we have the cross.

We live in grace all the time. Last week we heard that we're called to be a word-centered church, that the big thing Jesus is doing in his world today is that by his Spirit-empowered people, he is scattering his word and looking for good soil for the word to land in and produce fruit.

That's what we looked at last week, that we need to be a Bible-centered church if we're on board with God's plan for us. And that's where we've got to. I wonder what naturally we would have thought before our Bible reading that we would need to be next as a church.

If you go to conferences about church growth and church leadership, which I guess not many of you do, but I end up going to, okay, what you think you need next as a church, right, got the cross, we've got the Bible, what we need now is loads of really gifted people, highly competent, reliable, inventive people, dynamic people, beautiful people, cool, attractive, capable, popular, and skillful people.

And then we'll grow. That's what we need to grow as a church. And there was a church that thought a bit like that in the first century, that had kind of adopted worldly values about what they needed as a church.

[6 : 18] A church that wasn't short on gifts and on gifted people and they knew it. And the church gets rebuked by the Holy Spirit because it lacks something much more important than giftedness.

It lacks love. That's the theme of 1 Corinthians 13 to this church in Corinth, a gifted church. And we're going to look tonight at that chapter under three headings. The priority of love, the practice of love, and thirdly, the permanence of love.

So first of all, the priority of love. This is the Apostle Paul writing to this church that had become preoccupied with their gifts. Gifts of the Spirit are good things, right?

They are really good things. They're gifts. But the supreme priority is love. And the church was focusing on speaking gifts, especially the gift of tongues, which is a gift that the Spirit gives to his church to enable people to speak in a different language, either to help with personal prayer or to help a wider congregation, if someone's there to interpret the message in a tongue, to help build up the church.

But look at verse 1 and what Paul says. He says, If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

[7 : 40] If you've been to the rectory, you'll know where we live. We live on a dual carriageway. And just a couple of months ago, we had new double glazing fitted, very kindly by the church. They fitted new windows at the front of the house.

But the main reason was that the noise from the road outside is quite full on on a dual carriageway on Crow Road. But what an awful thought it is that when I get up to speak to you guys here, having worked hard on a sermon, or when you meet up with a friend to speak to them about Jesus and encourage them or to open the gospel with them, that God could hear it as a horrible racket, a terrible row, that unless we are people of love, it sounds to God when we serve Him like a child getting up after the service and just clanging away on the cymbals and making a terrible noise.

And then Paul goes on to speak about knowledge of God and discernment of God's will and wisdom to know how to live in God's world. If you have a look, he says, if I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and then he talks about having the gift of great faith, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Just think about that for a moment. Think about the great prophet Elijah. Elijah went up Mount Carmel and it's like he's the only prophet left at that time in Israel of the true God.

And all these prophets of Baal are there and it must have been so intimidating and they all want him dead and he gets them to build an altar to their false God and he mocks them and says, call down fire from heaven from your God and then he gets them to put water around his altar, doesn't he?

[9 : 27] And he says, well, he just prays to God and fire comes down and I read that story and I think, I wish I had faith like him. Elijah, what a legend. Or Moses, you know, leading the people and

when God's angry with the people, he prays to God and God relents of the anger.

Imagine feeling you could pray as powerfully as that. And yet Paul says here, you could have that measure of faith, that kind of faith or that degree of knowledge of God, that kind of prophetic gift and if you don't have love with it, you're a complete zero.

It's extraordinary. And if you turn things around the other way, how reassuring to know that if you have love, if you're in some way growing in love for God in your Christian life and as a result, you're growing in love for other people, it counts more than all of those great gifts.

You don't need to think about the gifts you don't have. You just focus on love. And then he talks, Paul, about the ultimate sacrifices you can make in your Christian life.

Verse three, if I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

[10:47] So you could move to Zimbabwe or Niger, somewhere where living as a Christian is extremely difficult. And you could sell everything you've got and give it to the Glasgow City Mission.

But if you did that without any real love for God behind it, then you'd gain nothing from doing it. What matters to God is what's going on in our hearts.

The story is told of, it's from an old preacher actually, Spurgeon, of a nobleman who was in the court of his king, the nobleman, and he's watching on in the court. And while he's there, the king's gardener walks in and he presents a big carrot to the king.

And the gardener bows down and he says to the king, Your Majesty, you're such a great king and I love you so much. I just wanted to honour you by giving you this carrot that I've grown for you.

And the king is delighted with the carrot that the gardener brings. So he makes an order showering the gardener with riches and gifts. And the nobleman's looking at it and he sees it and he has an idea.

[11:51] Okay. So the next day, he gets one of his finest horses and he brings it to the king in the court and he bows down low and he says, Your Majesty, you are such a great king and I love you so much.

I want to honour you with this horse which is one of my best horses. And the king smiles and he thanks the nobleman and he accepts the horse and then he doesn't do anything else.

And the nobleman is visibly crestfallen. He doesn't know what to do. So the king looks at him and he explains. He says, Yesterday, the gardener gave me the carrot but today, you gave the horse to yourself.

In other words, even the most extraordinary and sacrificial acts done for Jesus could actually be done selfishly. And it's true for us as a church.

We could be serving hard but actually in a self-seeking way. Not stirred up by a real love for God and for his people. Love is the key.

[12:51] Love fulfills all of God's commands. Extraordinary, isn't it? Galatians 5, 14. Paul says this, The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command, Love your neighbor as yourself.

That's the priority that should be the key mark that we have as a congregation. That our hearts, moved by the cross, built on the foundation of the Bible, are overflowing with love.

And it's remarkable, isn't it, that love is the priority because I guess for most of us, it's not something that's high enough on our criteria if we think about what we're looking for in a church.

You know, if you were traveling and you visited a church in a different place, often what we notice when we visit a church are the gifts. We notice the building, the feel of the building.

We notice the quality of the coffee and the biscuits, the quality of the music, the quality of the preaching. We might think, this is a place where I can enjoy myself, where I can learn loads more stuff in my head about God, where I can experience rock concert style praise.

[13:57] Even, we might even think, this is a place that's entertaining me. But what we should be thinking is, is this a place where because the cross is central and the word is scattered, the people seem to love God and love each other so that I could really be challenged in my love for God and in my love for people.

That's our first point, the priority of love. But what is love? We've all got a big idea about love from our culture because it's such a big word in our culture.

But we think in our culture about a feeling that we can't control. You know, that you fall into love and you fall out of love and what you have to do is follow your feelings about love.

But God says that love is immensely practical. That's our second point, the practice of love. Certainly, it's something inside of us that motivates us, but it gets reflected outside of us. It's observable. And if you don't feel like loving somebody, if you don't feel love for somebody that you know you should love, then the way forward, well, one key way forward, is to just get on and practice loving them.

[15:08] Because if you serve somebody, you grow in love for them. It's true in marriage. If you're married and you don't feel love for your spouse, if you get on and serve them and practice love, you find you love them more.

Your love for them grows. And Paul lists a number of practical outworkings of love here because these were not manifest in the Corinthian church. This is meant to be an uncomfortable list for them to read.

There are 11 of them, right? We're going to look at them. Verse 4. Love is patient. It's a great miracle of church that we are thrown together into a new family by God.

And it's a group of people we wouldn't have chosen to be with. We've got different tastes, different temperaments, different preferences, different ideas about what we want from our meetings together.

and the loving church is patient. We're patient with each other. We see sin in each other. But being patient is about not demanding that everyone changes overnight and not shopping around for a different church where we feel people don't sin as much.

[16:16] Fitting our exact set of ideas about how church should be. No, love is patient. Next, love is kind. And again, when we're thinking about what we might want for our church or for our evening service, the temptation is to see people who disagree with us as an obstacle to be overcome instead of seeing them as somebody to be kind to and to show kindness.

Love does not envy. Envy is unhappiness at someone else's success. If you imagine, just imagine, I heard this story over the summer thinking, it just helped me think about envy.

Just imagine that you play the bassoon and you let Andrew know that you want to be in the band because you're really good at the bassoon. You think you're okay at the bassoon. And Andrew speaks to the worship leaders and they want you to play the bassoon every week in the evening service.

So you come along and you've got your double reed there and you're making that great sound with the bassoon and that's your area of service and week by week you're in the evening service band and then one evening, someone walks into church with a bassoon.

And it turns out they're amazing at the bassoon. Absolutely breathtaking. You've got the best bassoon player in Scotland. How do you feel? Well, envy hates that person.

[17:36] Hates them. Envy doesn't want her anywhere near my church because I play the bassoon around here. But love doesn't envy. Love rejoices in the success of others. Love rejoices if we see the gospel advance through another church rather than resenting their success.

And if and when we do see growth in our congregation, the next one is love does not boast. So we don't look for ways to drop into our conversations over coffee, the ways we've been asked to serve that we think people will think better of us for.

We don't try and tell other people on social media about our successes, parading them. No, instead we just look for ways to serve others quietly and long for God to get the glory.

So love affects how we describe our successes to others but it also affects how we feel about success ourselves. That's our next mark of love. Love is not proud. And pride is such a deceptive sin.

It's the stealth bomber of a sin, right? Stealth bombers they're undetectable by radar and pride gets in under the radar because you could be someone who is doing all the right stuff for God and actually you slip into doing it for yourself.

[18:55] Pride when things are not going well turns into self-pity. Why are these things happening to me? And when we're doing lots of ministry and service pride longs for other people to notice and becomes self-serving.

It's a frightening thing pride. Then he says love does not dishonor others and sometimes we can think we can justify dishonoring other people because we think well I'm just being honest it's good to speak my mind I think it's just good to get it out there and be honest when actually we're just being rude about people and critical.

We don't dishonor others by the way we welcome that when new people arrive we don't think we don't really want them in our crowd but we welcome them whoever they are and we serve them so that no one feels left out.

Love is not self-seeking so we don't come to church for what we can get out of it I mean it's good to realize that we need each other and we need God's community and we need the ministry that God brings to us in the word and in prayer and praise but fundamentally we come to church out of love for other people's needs looking out for their interests rather than our own.

Love is not easily angered. It's so easy to get frustrated when we're serving and we feel let down or we feel as though our church would be so much better if only people would listen to what we think about things but just as we heard love is patient we need to remember that the godly way to respond to being frustrated by other people is to show compassion to let things go to be gentle with people and you can practice that during the week for when you're together when we're together as church you can practice it at home not being easily angered especially if you've got kids and you can practice it in the car that's a great place to practice love is not easily angered love keeps no record of wrongs we're a bunch of sinners who had to we're so bad at sinning we had to be saved by 100% grace we contributed nothing so if you spend any reasonable degree of time with any of us you are going to see sin and what Satan wants us to do to stop our church growing is build up resentment towards one another in our hearts and if we're willing if we're willing to let bitterness grow it will it'll find reasons to so even though it's unbelievably difficult we're called to treat each other and each other people's sin in the same way that God has treated our sin forgetting it we keep no record of it we let it go for their good but also for our good because it really does you no good to hold on to a record of other people's wrongs love does not delight in evil and it's tempting in a church community to build up a sort of a culture of tolerance of sin where we joke and enjoy stories about each other that actually are about saying and doing things that God doesn't approve of well instead we should be rejoicing in the truth and not willing to delight in evil and then last of all we're called to perseverance love always protects always trusts always hopes always perseveres for it's not so difficult

[22 : 36] I guess to be loving for a short season and there's a temptation when it gets harder to give up to move on to give up on church but love keeps going it binds you to people it endures hardship and frustration and slowness and keeps walking through life with a church family just as God perseveres with us always protecting us from falling away always faithful to his promises always working towards the future when we'll be with him forever and it's that future that we come to with our third point so we thought about the priority of love then about the practice of love and thirdly we see the permanence of love so the Corinthian church they're buzzing about the spiritual gifts on shore and today as well the temptation is to be preoccupied with gifts but Paul says prophecies tongues spiritual knowledge they'll eventually go silent and disappear they're like scaffolding to support the building the church until Christ returns and then they'll fall away look at verses 11 and 12 he says when I was a child this is his illustration of it when I was a child

I taught like a child I thought like a child I reasoned like a child when I became a man I put the ways of childhood behind me for now we see only a reflection as in a mirror then we shall see face to face now I know in part then I shall know fully even as I'm fully known see what he's saying this age for the church is like the childlike phase before Christ comes in glory and we reach maturity together so spiritual gifts they're good things but they are childish they're a dim reflection of what's coming when we taught our eldest daughter to ride a bike we first gave her a bike with stabilizers on and our youngest daughter is learning to swim she's got armbands on and they're childish things helping them until they grow enough that they don't need them anymore and spiritual gifts for a church they're like stabilizers or armbands when Jesus comes again we won't need them anymore so they're not a sign of being spiritually mature having spiritual gifts they are great things because they are things the Lord uses if we use them rightly to grow to maturity but they're not in themselves marks that we are mature so it's strange when you think about it that the thing we find most noticeable in a church are the things that are most temporary and childlike things that won't actually be in heaven and maybe for us as individuals as well our temptation is to assess ourselves wrongly to think less of ourselves because we don't have gifts that we see other people have when we shouldn't assess ourselves by something that's temporary and in contrast love lasts forever verse 13 and now these three remain faith, hope and love but the greatest of these is love

I was talking to a friend just the other day who's just bought a car and he was talking about the decision making process when you buy a car and how the previous car he bought was expensive and when he bought it he thought this is a lot of money to spend on a car but it had driven 250,000 miles this car and when you're buying a car you don't just think about the price immediately you have to think about it over the lifespan over the vehicle and we do that with all kinds of things don't we?

the washing machine things in our life where you think well I'll pay the extra for something quality because it will last well here we're being called as a church to invest in love to prioritize love partly because that's the thing that lasts forever we won't need faith or hope in heaven because we'll be with Jesus and our hope will be realized but love is what the new creation is all about we will be perfectly loved and perfectly loving and even if we feel let down in this life by love if we feel that our home or our family or relationships have let us down they've lacked love we can fix our eyes on that perfect loving home that's coming so knowing that's how we'll spend our eternity let's throw ourselves as a church into acts of love today when we're serving somebody in need out of love when we're visiting somebody lonely who takes time or we're listening patiently to someone who's upset we're not being distracted from what really matters because love is what really matters Christ has loved us and we'll be loving him and each other forever and where do we look when we know we should be loving more and we don't feel the love well of course we look at the way Christ first loved us that if he was self-seeking if he kept a record of wrongs he would be in heaven and he would have never left and we would still be dead in our sins but moved by love he set that love on us and chose us and while we were still rejecting him and hating him he died for our redemption he rose because our sin was paid for and sent his spirit to open our eyes and strengthen us to grasp how wide and long and high and deep his love is for us it's knowing that he first loved us that works in our hearts so that love overflows out of us we love because we're cross-centered we love because we're word-centered and as Jesus scatters that word among us like seed on good soil the fruit that should grow in a bible-centered church is love

[28 : 31] Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Thank you.