

The Gold Standard - Love...

1 Corinthians 13/ John 13³⁴

The 'Gold Standard' of the Christian life is love. It is love which makes Christian community work and which makes it different from any other community. It is love which makes our life together attractive and it is love which makes the language of our community universal. With love we can reach anyone person or any culture at any time. And we can do so because humankind thirsts for true love...

Love is unbelievably difficult. It may start out easily but the way never stays that way for long... we humans are just too self-centred for that. IN the end all love must be expressed in self-sacrifice...

During the 17th century, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, sentenced a soldier to be shot for his crimes. The execution was to take place at the ringing of the evening curfew bell. However, the bell did not sound. The soldier's fiancé had climbed into the belfry and clung to the great clapper of the bell to prevent it from striking. When she was summoned by Cromwell to account for her actions, she wept as she showed him her bruised and bleeding hands. Cromwell's heart was touched and he said, "Your lover shall live because of your sacrifice. Curfew shall not ring tonight!"

In his book 'The Four Loves' C.S.Lewis wrote this about love...

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket--safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable,

irredeemable...The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers...of love is Hell. "

The question before us isn't whether love is important or needed or even great. The question is 'What does it mean to love?' In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul analyses love in terms of the way the culture into which he was writing understood it. The question behind this chapter was 'what is the **true** nature of love as revealed in the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and how does this compare to this culture's understanding of it?' It is important to remember that Paul is speaking into a very religious age where the most accepted explanatory device is spiritual and so all roads tended to lead to the pantheon of gods which constituted the present-day world-view. Into this environment Paul speaks love. He begins by stating clearly to his readers that the greatest way to live, the greatest thing to aspire to as a person of faith... is love. But what does this look like? According to Paul three things sum up the thinking of the age in regard to love... 1. Words 2. Knowledge and 3. Sacrifice. These three sum up the best thinking about love in this ancient age. That age asked 'How might we recognize love and the answer came back – by our words, our knowledge and our self-sacrifice.

The interesting thing is that one might well give the same answer in this most secular of all ages. What does it take to be a great lover today? Words. Words that make us look good, appear sensitive and wise, elicit in another a sense of being valued of being desired. Words that are both powerfully seductive and flattering always come into play somewhere in our romantic world.

Again knowledge is another powerful tool in a great lover's arsenal. Knowing the other, knowing self, knowing the world are all powerfully attractive things. Who are the people in movies who tend to miss out on love? They are the slow people, the people who can't keep up, the people who don't know how.

Finally the metaphor of sacrifice elicits for us a picture of love for surely those who sacrifice - love? Even Jesus agrees with this one... 'Greater love has no man than that he should lay down his life for his friends.' And this is true. We have our icons of sacrifice both religious and secular. We laud those soldiers who died that we might live apart from the tyranny of the aggressors in the two world wars. We

remember them and we speak the word 'love' in their memory. But we also, if we are people of faith, laud those such as Mother Theresa who laid down her life as a living sacrifice for others.

Frankly all these things are important and often helpful but Paul says **they are nothing in the presence of true love**. True love is of an almost completely different dimension. It is not interested primarily in **influencing** others either by our words or by our knowledge or, indeed, even by our sacrifice. Rather love is interested in these things...

It is interested in... **patience**. What is patience? Patience is the deliberate adjustment of one's pace and agenda to that of slowest member. It is the deliberate sublimation of one's ability and power to the level of another's ability and power. How hard this is for us. There's an old Dutch proverb that goes... **'A handful of patience is worth more than a bushel of brains.'** A man called Comte de Buffon once said this... **'Never think that God's delays are God's denials. Hold on; hold fast; hold out. Patience is genius.'** But the one I like the most comes from the pen of that great preacher Peter Marshall who wrote... **'Teach us, O Lord, the disciplines of patience, for to wait is often harder than to work.'** To wait is harder often than to work... How true this is. Ask a man to work and most will come up to the challenge. Ask him to wait and few can wait for long.

And love is interested in **kindness**. How odd. We could all think of something more substantial than kindness for love to be interested in couldn't we? What about, commitment or sacrifice or even compassion? Why should love be so interested in kindness? One clue comes with the etymology of the word 'kind.' It goes back to the Old Germanic for family and we still have an echo of that in the saying 'kith and kin' where kin refers to one's family. So kindness extends this sense of family into how we treat another that is, we treat them as we would family. We extend to them the familial bond of love and we love them not as a favour but as a duty – the duty we would normally owe our family. Kindness, then, is more than an isolated act of compassion or sacrifice. It is, rather, an act of inclusion; an act designed to say – we include you as one of us; we want you to know you **belong** with us.

If you think about this is much much more powerful than simply offering charity in a one off act of compassion. Kindness has this stronger sense of inclusion and belonging and as I've said many times – our culture is starved of belonging and our young people are looking for it wherever they can find it. William Wordsworth once said this of kindness... **'That best portion of a good man's life, His little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness....'**

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love is not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude... Don't we know this already? Why should Paul have to remind us of this? It's obvious isn't it? Perhaps not in a world which believes so strongly in the power of one's speech, one's knowledge and one's sacrifice. When what we believe to be love is aligned so strongly with these personal powers it is so easy for envy, boastfulness and arrogance to creep in. After all, have I not touched many thousands with my abilities; have I not blessed to world with my knowledge and have I not served the world with my sacrifice? When do much depends upon what is ours – we become the focus and if love is anything is it **other** focused not **self**-focused. Love is **not** envious, boastful, arrogant or rude...

In the same way and for the same reasons such love may become irritable and resentful but surely it would not rejoice in wrongdoing? Surely it would always rejoice in truth and not untruth? Perhaps not. We have plenty of examples of things done in the name of love towards one person or peoples which have condemned others to a horrible fate. The great clearances in Scotland when thousands of peasant farmers were simply removed so that the land could be sold. No concern was given to the livelihood of these farmers or their families. They were allowed to starve. The fate of native nations in countries colonized by the West. The fate of the Jews during World War 2, the fate of the black peoples

of South Africa under a Christian white government. All of these things were committed by so called Christian peoples in the name of love for their own kind.

‘Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.’ Let’s be clear. Paul is not saying here ‘Love believes **anything**, hopes in **anything**, endures **anything**’. Rather Paul is saying that love **for the sake of its own cause** will put up with anything **to be love**. In other words **love doesn’t stop loving because it is hard!** Rather it is precisely within that hardness that love is proven to be love and there can be no greater display of this that Christ’s going to the Cross. This is and will always be the greatest example of love ever known. In the midst of loving a people God allowed His Son to die by the very hand of the people He was loving so that love might be seen to be love. This is the true nature of love. It loves in the face of the opposite of love. As G K Chesterton was so fond of saying...

“The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.”

For the last 5 verses of the chapter Paul goes back to his theme of the inadequacy of anything but love to fill the void of human need. The first thing he tackled back in verse one was the illusory nature of **words** to fill the void and he goes back to this pointing out the temporary nature of words... ⁸“Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease;” Words, even glorious and powerful words have a shelf life. They don’t last and they can’t carry the real furniture of love. Film after film ignores this. Hero after heroine falls for the words ‘I love you’ and suffers for it. We might express our love well through words but words can never be the final product. **Love is much more than words.**

Neither can knowledge fill this void... “as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.” Knowledge, this side of death, is incomplete. It cannot carry the furniture of love. It cannot do the work, the real work of love. Both words and knowledge suffer from the great lack of this age – maturity. **In the Bible Jesus praises a childish approach to faith but never a**

childish approach to love. Children put their trust in others in the same way Jesus would have us put our trust in God. It is good to be like this in regard to faith. But love requires an adult’s ability to decide with real commitment. That is why marriage is not for children. The commitments of true love are not for the young. As Paul says...

¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Love is more than knowledge. The gold standard of Christian life is love. Love carries God’s Presence into the world; only love is strong enough to do this. Faith hope and love are each, in their own way, eternal qualities but again, as Paul says, the strongest of these is love.

Love has two enduring qualities... it is unearned and it brings life...

Ted Stallard undoubtedly qualified as the one of the least lovable children in Miss Thompson’s classroom. Very sloppy in appearance. Expressionless. Unattractive. Even she enjoyed bearing down her red pen -- as she placed Xs beside his many wrong answers. If only she had studied his records more carefully. They read:

1st grade: Ted shows promise with his work and attitude, but (has) poor home situation. 2nd grade: Ted could do better. Mother seriously ill. Receives little help from home. 3rd grade: Ted is good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year. 4th grade: Ted is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest whatsoever.

Christmas arrived. The children piled elaborately wrapped gifts on their teacher’s desk. Ted brought one too. It was wrapped in brown paper and held together with Scotch Tape. Miss Thompson opened each gift, as the children crowded around to watch. Out of Ted’s package fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half of the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to snicker. But she silenced them by splashing some of the perfume on her wrist,

and letting them smell it. She put the bracelet on too. At day's end, after the other children had left, Ted came by the teacher's desk and said, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother. And the bracelet looks real pretty on you. I'm glad you like my presents." He left. Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her and to change her attitude.

The next day, the children were greeted by a reformed teacher -- one committed to love. She loved especially the slow ones. Especially Ted. Surprisingly -- or maybe, not surprisingly, Ted began to show great improvement. He actually caught up with most of the students and even passed a few. Time came and went. Miss Thompson heard nothing from Ted for a long time. Then, one day, she received this note:

Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class. Love, Ted

Four years later, another note arrived: Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it. Love, Ted

And four years later: Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year. Miss Thompson attended that wedding, and sat where Ted's mother would have sat. The love she had shown that untidy unattractive little boy entitled her to that privilege.

Love is the gold standard of our life together here at Leith.