

And yet shew I unto you a more excellent way. 1 Corinthians 12.31.

And now in our study of 1 *Corinthians* we come to the most famous passage in the letter, if not in the whole Bible:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

This passage is one of the high points in scripture, and in the old stately language of the 1611 KJV it is even more sublime. This 13th chapter of 1 Cor is one of the great pieces of literature, whether one is a believer or not. What a moving hymn of praise to love!

Love ('charity' in the AV) suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, endureth all things.

And the whole thing ends with simplicity which is pure genius:

And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Even the world's greatest atheists could not fail to be inspired by this passage which describes the primacy of love. What is life without faith; without faithfulness, constancy and reliability? Who can live a worthwhile life without hope? What meaning does life have without love; without loving and being loved? No-one will ever convince me that the Bible is irrelevant to modern life. All the problems in the world come from the fact that people are let down by the faithlessness of others; that they have no hope, and have no love in their lives. Without faith, hope, and love, there is no trust, just despair and hatred.

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No wonder this sublime portion of scripture is read at weddings.

Weddings are all about love, of course, but the couple also pledge their faithfulness to each other, 'for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part'. They also look forward with great hopefulness.

The trouble is that we have become so accustomed to 1 Cor 13 being read at weddings, that we think this is what the passage is about. It's a hymn to love. And so it is, but we need to ask why St Paul wrote it where he did in this letter to the Corinthians. As always, context is everything.

Remember why Paul was writing this letter in the first place. There was a small group in the congregation who thought they were better than the rest. They were richer, better educated, higher status, and, to cap it all, they had spiritual gifts like being able to speak in tongues and prophesy. Didn't that *prove* that they were better Christians? Unfortunately this attitude of the spiritual elite was bitterly dividing the congregation and hurting many people who were made to feel inadequate and worthless.

Turn to your Bibles now, to p1153, and you will see that chap 12 is all about these spiritual gifts. See how that chapter ends at v30 with mention of speaking in tongues... Now turn over the page to chap 14, to v2, and you will see that we are back to speaking in tongues... In other words you could miss out chap13 and join the end of chap 12 to the beginning of chap 14 and the whole thing would make sense! My point is that Paul has broken off his argument and inserted this sublime chap 13 because what he is basically saying is this: 'Look! You pride yourself on being so spiritual with all your special gifts like speaking in tongues that you've forgotten the one

thing that is really essential - love. By thinking you're so superior and looking down your noses at the 'ordinary' members of the congregation, you've forgotten about loving people. So in fact, instead of being top of the class, you're really at the bottom'.

Now you can see why this famous passage begins with talk of 'tongues of men and of angels'. He means, 'What's the point of speaking in tongues, if there's no love in your hearts? What's the point of being able to prophesy, if you don't love the people around you in church? If you don't give to the poor with love in your heart, it's nothing. You're nothing.' Let's read 13.1-3 again ... The sign of a Christian is not that he can speak in tongues, but that he has love in his heart. Without love you're nothing.

But what *is* this thing called 'love'? Is it that burning, consuming desire for a devastatingly beautiful woman? Is it that love some mothers have for their children that is so controlling that it is really smothering rather than mothering? Is this love something that makes *you* feel good, or something that does good to others? Is it for *your* benefit, or for others? 'Love' is a slippery word, isn't it? It can mean lust. It can be the love between friends, the love between parent and child. It can lead some to madness, jealousy, even murder, so-called 'crimes of passion'. Love can be slop and sentimentality. On the other hand love can be the self-sacrifice which would make you gladly give one of your kidneys for someone else.

Greek is a more helpful language here. It has *four* words for the different types of love: *philia* for the love between friends, *storge* for the love between parents and children, and *eros* for that

burning love from which we get the English word 'erotic'. But there is a fourth called *agape*. If *eros* can be a very selfish love, *agape* is a love which puts others first. When our love for our partners is essentially *eros*, it is inevitable that we will divorce one day, because it's all about me. Once I've tired of her, I dump her. *Eros* is the love you fall out of. It's all *feelings* - *my* feelings.

But when your love for your partner is more *agape* than *eros*, you put your partner before self. It's about making *her* happy. It's not about *your* feelings, but *hers*. In fact *agape* isn't a feeling at all; it's a decision of the will to put him before me. With *agape*, there is always something of sacrifice, of putting yourself out. Let's read 13.4-7 again... This was what the snobbish Corinthian elite were just not getting as they looked down on the rest of the church.

When the NT talks of *God's* love for us, it uses this lovely Gk word *agape*. Jesus loved us so much that he sacrificed his life for us on the Cross. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' When we are commanded to love God and our neighbour as ourselves, again the word is *agape*. *Agape* is unnatural. *Philia*, *storge*, and *eros* are certainly natural, but *agape* is divine. It is Christlike. I believe that if we truly treated each other like this, the world would be queuing to get to church.

One last thing: I said that *agape* is Christlike. It comes from him. Let's retranslate vv4-7 by replacing the word 'love' with 'Jesus'. We now get a perfect description of our Lord and Saviour:

Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. Jesus does not envy; he does not boast, and is not proud. Jesus is not rude. He is not self-seeking. Jesus is not easily angered, and he keeps no record of wrongs. Jesus does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.