

Eastwood Baptist (25/11/'18) **"FOLLOW THE WAY OF LOVE"** (1 Corinthians 13-14)

Introduction What do you think is the most beautiful word in the English language? Would you choose "love"? I'm sure that many people would. But there is a difficulty. The English word "love" is used in a great variety of ways. We can say, "I love God." Or, "I love my wife, my husband, my children." But we can also say things like "I love ice cream" or "I love watching my favourite TV program". Some people have claimed that this is not the case with the first century Greek words *agape* (the noun) and *agapaō* (the verb), but this is not true. The truth is that the New Testament writers took hold of a rather imprecise word group, and filled it with Christian meaning. We can see this happening in 1 Corinthians 13, and we can see it even more clearly if we look at Chapter 13 in conjunction with Chapter 14.

"The Most Excellent Way" (1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:3) Paul begins by naming things which were admired by the Corinthians, and placing them over against love. **Read 12:31b-13:3.** Many of the Corinthians admired speaking in tongues, but Paul says that without love it is no more than empty noise. Paul himself valued prophecy, but he still says that the prophet without love is nothing. The Jews in Corinth would have esteemed the giving of alms to the poor, but Paul says that even this gains nothing without love. Finally he imagines the most remarkable self-sacrifice, and declares that this also gains nothing without love.

How Love Acts (13:4-7) These verses consist of series of verbs describing how love acts. If we try to reflect this in an English translation, it might sound like this: *Love suffers long; love acts kindly; love does not act out of jealousy; it does not boast; it is not puffed up. Love does not behave rudely; it does not pursue selfish goals; it does not lose its temper; it does not keep a record of wrongs. Love does not delight in wickedness, but rejoices in the truth. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always endures.* This love is not a feeling, nor is it an abstract idea. This love is expressed in acting for the good of others, and in refraining from acting against others. This love looks like the way Jesus lived. It is a high standard, and we won't ever succeed perfectly in living like this. But it should be our goal. And even an imperfect imitation of the love of Jesus can make a deep impression.

"Love Always Endures" (13:8-13) Paul's series of statements about how love acts ends with the words "love always endures". Here he is speaking about enduring in this life, about "persevering", as the NIV translates it. But now he begins to speak about a kind of enduring which goes beyond this life. Paul says that love never fails, or ends. In this it is greater than prophecies and tongues, and all human knowledge. These are good things, but they are partial, not perfect. They are like those things which are appropriate to childhood, but pass away when adulthood comes. Paul looks forward to the perfection which will come when Jesus returns. This will be a time of seeing face to face, not indirectly as in a mirror. This will be a time of knowing fully, just as God has always known us fully. This will be a time when faith will give way to sight, and hope to fulfilment, but when love will simply enter into its perfection. But for now, faith, hope and love all remain. Yet it is in loving in the way which Paul has described, in loving as Jesus loved, that we most nearly approach the perfection of heaven. Not in speaking words about love, even the beautiful words of 1 Corinthians 13, but in acting in love. This is why it is good not to isolate 1 Corinthians 13, but to continue on into Chapter 14.

Love Should Control the Gifts (14:1-25) Notice how Chapter 14 begins: “follow the way of love”. Paul doesn’t want the Corinthians merely to talk about the way of love – he wants them to *follow* it. He wants the way of love to govern their exercising of spiritual gifts, and indeed all their behaviour when they gather together. And it is this way of love which lies behind Paul’s giving priority to prophecy ahead of speaking in tongues. **Read 14:2-4.** Paul wants those who speak in their gatherings to build up the church. He needed to say this because some of the Corinthians were more focused on enjoying excitement and being admired than benefiting one another. Paul later goes on to consider not only what is good for one’s fellow church members, but also for visitors, especially those visitors who have not yet come to faith in Christ. **Read 14:23-25.** What should we learn from what Paul says, since our gatherings are different from those of the Corinthians? It is not normal for people to speak in tongues in our church, and prophecy in the strict sense is not normal either. But Paul’s reasons for preferring prophecy to tongues are still applicable. We need to encourage behaviour which builds people up, which benefits all who are present. In church services, this means that all who take part should consistently act in accord with this principle. Our spiritual gifts are given to us by God for the benefit of all. And so are our natural talents. Even skills which we have worked to develop belong to God if we ourselves belong to God, and so they should be used to help others. This applies to our church services, but not only to our church services. Whenever we are with other people, whether those who have faith in Christ or those who have not yet come to faith in Christ, we should endeavour to benefit them. There are people in every Christian group who help others to feel at home in that group, and show others in the group something of what Christian love is about. There are Christians who bring the love of Christ into every situation, and cause people who do not believe in Christ to be attracted to Christian faith. Let us all desire to be such people.

Love Should Control Our Gatherings (14:26-40) In the last part of Chapter 14, Paul continues to teach about the use of spiritual gifts in their gatherings, but also broadens his teaching about their gatherings beyond the use of the gifts. He also continues to appeal to the principle of love, expressed through a concern for the benefit of all – **read 14:31.** And he introduces a second principle, the principle of order – **read 14:40.** This second principle arises from Paul’s understanding of the character of God – **read 14:33a.** He applies these principles to speaking in tongues, to prophesying and to the behaviour of women. I intend to look only at the first two, since I looked at it the behaviour of women a fortnight ago in conjunction with Chapter Eleven. Near the end Paul distinguishes between prophecy and tongues – **read 14:39.** He encourages prophecy more strongly, but says that speaking in tongues is not to be forbidden. But before this he regulates both in similar ways, to preserve order and to ensure that people are built up. **Read 14:27-28.** What about us? I don’t think disorder is often a problem. We should maintain our good order, but we need to take care not to drift into a kind of order that makes it hard for some of those present to participate meaningfully. We need to look for ways of building everybody up, both those who have attended for many years and those who are new to our church.

Conclusion Christian love is not primarily about nice words or warm feelings, but about Christlike actions. This applies to our gatherings especially, but also to the rest of our lives as Christians. Let us all live lives which tell people about Jesus.