

# The Choice of Love

## Choosing to Love (part 6)

Summary: The apostle Paul was absolutely convinced of the superiority of love over extraordinary spiritual gifts and maturity, over eloquence and wisdom, even over extravagant deeds of generosity and self-sacrifice. Without love, all gifts and powers and actions we might claim for ourselves are worthless. Whom and how do we love so we are known for love?

Scripture: Galatians 6:1-10; 1 Corinthians 13<sup>1</sup>

Date: Sunday, 24 July 2022 (Narellan CCC)

### We Will Be Known For Our Love

The famous Love chapter of the apostle Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, which is often read at weddings, by popular demand—and soon to be read at funerals, if I have my way—the Love chapter reinforces love as the *raison d'être* of Christian faith and lifestyle.

We love because he first loved us.

(1 John 4:19)

Love is why we exist: God loves us and, because of his love for us, we then love those around us, whether our immediate family, our brothers and sisters-in-faith, our friends, our neighbours, or even strangers (1 Jn 4:19; cf. Mt 25:31ff).

The biblical concept of love, based on the Greek word *agápē*, does not refer to sexual love, romantic love, friendship or sentiment, although these find their basis in *agápē*. This love which we are exploring is its purest expression, out of which all other forms arise.

It is worth pausing to consider: if we do not know the love of God, then how can our sexual love, romantic love, friendship or sentiment even be, in fact, pure, not self-centredness in disguise?

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Without love, the apostle stated succinctly, “I am nothing” and “I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:2, 3).

Paul made this claim because of two convictions:

1. “Love’s nature is to seek not one’s own needs but the needs of others”; and, in so doing,
2. “Love ultimately secures not only the other person but also one’s own self.”<sup>2</sup>

Love is directed toward others, but we find ourselves in the doing.

The true nature of love is in complete contrast to the contemporary pursuit of ‘identity’.

Today, boys and girls answer the question, “Who am I?”, by asking themselves, “How do I feel?”

Men and women learn the answer to the question, “Who am I?”, is really only found when we ask, “What have I done for others lately?”

Our identity is secured by what we do and what we have done.

For example, Dougie wakes up in the morning and puts on his tradie outfit. In those clothes he looks the part of an industrious little man.

Dougie might think to himself, “If I look like one and act like one, then I must be a tradie!”, but if he presents himself at a worksite and attempts to take control of a nail gun, then he might get a rude shock—as would we all!

It does not matter if he ‘feels’ like a tradie, he will not be accepted as such by others until he is actually capable of performing the skills and completing the tasks required of tradies, like building a house for a family to live in.

Dougie’s identity as a tradie will be based on his skill and his accomplishments for the sake of others, and his skill and accomplishments will and must be recognised by others.

When we die, no one will care about how we felt about ourselves or how we self-identified. In fact, no one could possibly know how we actually feel about ourselves or how we self-identify, unless we tell them. They know who we are by what we do. And the only thing that will matter in the end is did we love, who did we show love to, and how did we show that love?

Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love. *(1 Corinthians 13:13)*

As the apostle so wisely wrote, faith, hope, and love matter now, but love is the most important among them.<sup>3</sup> Why? Because it is the one of the three we actually share in common with our Creator.

Additionally, faith and hope will come to an end for faith will become our reality and hope will be replaced by sight, but the love of God, for God and from God will always remain. If we love here, then we will continue to love God, love one another, and love our neighbour forever, in the new Heaven and Earth.

## **Love Is a Command... or Is It?**

In all that we have explored together of the definition of love, why is it not more in evidence when our culture is so obviously enamoured with love? If we love the wisdom and encouragement of the Love chapter so much as to have it read at one of the most significant milestones in our life, why then do we not see more of such love?

This takes us back to the first humans, who fell from grace because of temptation to rebel against God’s wisdom and sovereignty. As a result, we are all today inclined more to self-centredness than to love.

This is what I command you: Love one another. *(John 15:17)*

It seems almost ridiculous to say, therefore, that **love is a command**. Somehow, we find it so hard to love that we have to be told to do it, with the urgency of an order from a person of authority. Otherwise, we are not likely to love nearly as often as we would like to think of ourselves.

We might bring ourselves to love another person once in a while, when it suits us or costs us little in time and effort (cf., Rom 5:6-8) —family life provides ample evidence of this. For the friends of Jesus, at least, our aim is to be known as a person who loved; that our glory, our reputation, is as one who loved well and often.

Sadly, though, if we are just following orders, even if that order is to love, then what might be counted to our credit as love is not really love at all, is it? How sad it is that we need to be commanded to love.

But there is a better way.

When we find it hard to serve the needs of others, by faith, love is a work of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). We are not alone in the choice to love! The closer we are to, and the more we rely on, the Holy Spirit, from the Holy Spirit we gain the courage and confidence required for us to choose to love.

Our choice to love is free, but we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to make the choice!

Here is a wise saying: we know that choices become habits; habits become character; character becomes destiny.<sup>4</sup> This is to say that, through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, love becomes less of a command and more of a pleasure. And it is then we become truly conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 12:2).

Put another way: God is love (noun). We love (verb) until we too become love (noun).

## **Whom Do We Love?**

The Love chapter is commonly read at weddings, but, as I have argued, it is not really appropriate for weddings. From 1 Corinthians 13, then, whom do we love?

The purpose of 1 Corinthians was to help that divided community find healing through the love of one another. Their spirituality had sadly steered some toward a spiritual arrogance that was quite destructive to the community and disastrous for the proclamation of the good news about Jesus.

The advice of the apostle, then, in 1 Corinthians 13, was that the Corinthians would love one another.

This is borne out in another of Paul's letters:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith. *(Galatians 6:10)*

Our love is “especially” for the community of faith, meaning first and foremost. Once we have progressed in this way, we then love our neighbours (Gal 6:10).

This might seem controversial to say, but we cannot give what we don't have. If you cannot love those with whom you share a faith in Jesus and a commitment to a Christian lifestyle, then how will you love your neighbour, with whom you share little, if anything at all?

By faith, we practising loving our community so that we may love our neighbours rightly. Another way of saying this is that our love within our community of faith overflows into the neighbourhood, for as Jesus himself stated,

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.  
(John 13:35)

Most certainly in our post-Christian society—if it can be argued we were ever a 'Christian' society—we must exemplify the Kingdom as an alternative community.

Dr. Renae Barker, a lecturer at the University of Western Australia, writing in *The Conversation*, noted,<sup>5</sup>

Australia is often described as a secular country and this ongoing movement from religion to “no religion” [in the Australian census data] is one way this manifests...

This ongoing shift in Australia's religious demographics plays out in our laws...

In the five years between the 2016 census and 2021 census, Australia saw a monumental shift in what might broadly be considered moral laws...

Marriage equality is just the tip of the iceberg. Euthanasia and abortion laws have also been reformed in the five years between the censuses...

Given this legal shift away from what are sometimes referred to as “traditional moral laws”, it may seem strange that, concurrently, there has also been an ongoing debate about freedom of religion.

The debate has been the fiercest, and most painful, in relation to discrimination by religious schools...

It is tempting to argue that, given the number of Australians who don't have a religion, religious belief should give way to the secular.

However, it is important to remember that a large portion of the population still identify with a religion.

Marriage equality, euthanasia, abortion, religious discrimination ... no matter where you fall on these issues, there is no denying our faith in Jesus has, and should have, a bearing on our opinions. Yet, to admit such is increasingly drawing scorn.

Our nation's law are beginning to reflect this shift in public opinion.

Not surprisingly, then, love practised within the community will be far easier than in a world that is suspicious, if not increasingly hostile, to Christians. We love within our community so that love may overflow into our neighbourhood.

We love within our community so that the neighbourhood, and even the world, around us may see how love is truly done.

Nowhere is this more evident, and hard, than in Jesus' command,

You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.  
But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so  
that you may be children of your Father in heaven... (Matthew 5:43-48)

Our enemies out in the world are hard to take, so loving them, and even praying for them, often seems beyond the realm of possibility. Yet a meme circulating on Facebook these days makes the point so clear,

The true test of Christianity is not loving Jesus, it's loving Judas.

We can speculate all we want on the quality of Judas' faith and whether he was 'saved' or not, but the fact remains he was among Jesus' core twelve disciples. He was within the community.

We might wonder how the other disciples would have reacted if Judas repented of his treachery? How would we handle a member or friend who commits an egregious sin? How would we handle a member or friend who offends us, even accidentally?

If cannot get the love of one another right, how will we represent Jesus well in the world? How will we demonstrate we are his disciples and that being a disciple is worthwhile?

## How Do We Love?

Through this series we have come to know that love prohibits us from giving expression to envy, boasting, and arrogance. Love does not act with rudeness or self-seeking. Neither does love become irritable, nor keep a record of by that which disposes us to irritability. Love does not find joy in the non-loving attitudes or actions of others whether directed toward us or against another.

Besides prohibitions, love consists of being proactively patient, kind, rejoicing in the truth. It involves bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things in, of, and for others because love never fails nor ends.

Love far exceeds any extraordinary spiritual gifts and maturity, any eloquence and wisdom, even any extravagant deeds of generosity and self-sacrifice. Without love, all gifts and powers and actions we might claim for ourselves are worthless.

Those are the principles. How then do we practise these?

The passage read from *Galatians* provides some practical example that protect against self-centredness within this community, for we rise to maturity together (Eph 4:13). There is all sorts of practical advice listed:

- restore fallen brothers and sisters with gentleness and advice (Gal 6:1a)
- learn from the mistakes of others for what to avoid (Gal 6:1b)
- endure and carry each other's moral faults and so fulfil the commands of God in your own faith and lifestyle (Gal 6:2)
- we are all prone to mistakes, so let us not think more highly of ourself than we ought (Gal 6:3; Rom 12:3)
- do not compare yourself to each other, especially with a view to 'puffing yourself up' (Gal 6:3-5)

- learn from each other and teach each other the riches of God's will and wisdom (Gal 6:6)
- endure in doing good so as to reap the riches (Gal 6:7-10)

Even just starting with these, we can and will become a community that exemplifies placing one's faith in Jesus and living a Christian lifestyle. They are a protective against becoming yet another church following in the tradition of Corinth. Characterised by these principles and practices, we will be a vanguard of the Kingdom come for which we pray.

Loving in these ways may not always be easy, if it ever is, but we follow Jesus' example anyway.

What was Jesus' example?

But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. *(Romans 5:8)*

Yes, it is true that, "No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends." (Jn 15:13), but Jesus' example was to give himself over to his enemies so to save them.

Let us start with our friends and family-by-faith so that we too may love our enemies and show the world how great is the love of God!

## Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians", in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 10 (Nashville, TN, USA: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), pg 952.
- 3 "The famous Pauline triad is most clearly present here (cf. Rom 5:1–5; Gal 5:5–6; Col 1:4–5; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8)." ~ibid, pg 955.
- 4 I picked this up from Christian theologian and pastor, Greg Boyd, but it is likely adapted from a maxim of Lao Tzu, a mystic philosopher of ancient China and founder of Taoism, who wrote: "Watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become your actions; watch your actions, they become your habits; watch your habits, they become your character; watch your character, it becomes your destiny."
- 5 Renae Barker, "'No religion' is Australia's second-largest religious group – and it's having a profound effect on our laws", *The Conversation*, 28-Jun-2022, <https://bit.ly/3zvPMj7> (accessed 21-Jul-2022).