

“How to Love your Spouse”

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

There’s a scene in the movie Cheaper by the Dozen, where the father is home taking care of the kids. His wife has received a lucrative book deal and must go to New York to meet with the publisher. The father has assured mom that everything will be o.k. while she’s gone, after all he’s the coach of a football team, surely he can handle a dozen kids? Right? Wrong, lets watch what happens...

All this mayhem and craziness reminds me of another family, the family of God in the city of Corinth back in ancient Greece. The apostle Paul had started this church and when he left to go start other churches things began to get out of control.

When news of this situation reached Paul he wrote back to them in an effort to bring some order and stability back and to correct the crazy situation in their church and so we have our letters to the Corinthians.

So what was going on in the Corinthian church? I think it’s helpful to understand this situation because it will cause us

to see that famous “Love Passage” in a new light and understand and better apply it to our own lives.

The Church in Corinth was a group of fairly new Christians, somewhat immature in their faith, but very talented or gifted spiritually.

Paul alludes to this, in 1:4-7 he says they are enriched in every way, in speaking and in knowledge, and they do not lack any spiritual gift.

⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—⁶because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.

But for all their giftedness the Corinthian church was not bearing good fruit. In chapter 3 Paul describes how they are divided because of jealousy and they are quarrelling.

³You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? ⁴For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men?

These disputes carried beyond arguing over who was their true leaders, and they had seeped into matters of everyday life.

In chapter 6 Paul complains that instead of being able to sit down and peacefully resolve their disputes, or better yet just being able to let it go, the Corinthian Christians were taking each other to court to have non-Christians settle their disputes.

¹If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints?

Paul also has to reprimands them for allowing and practicing sexual immorality. Temple prostitution was a popular practice in Corinth and apparently these believers were still participating in it.

¹⁵Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!

Along with the temple prostitution they were also participating in sacrifices to idols and Paul warns them of the consequences of this.

²⁰The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.

Additionally there were issues of caring and justice too. The early church often celebrated the Lord's Supper as a Pot-luck meal, and in Corinth the rich ate like gluttons, while the poor went hungry – nobody was sharing!

²⁰When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.

And their worship had turned into a competition to show off the knowledge and speaking gifts they had, and those who did not have such gifts were disdained.

²⁶What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

As you can see things had got quite out of hand in the Corinthian church.

This is the context in which Paul writes the famous passage on love that we find in chapter 13.

You see Paul knew that the core of the issue for the Corinthian church was that they were not showing love to each other.

As we have just seen, In every area of their church life they were more concerned about themselves than about each other.

This tragedy meant that they had forgotten the message of the gospel, because it embodies the kind of love that they were to be showing to each other in their church and day to day life.

I think many of us can look at the Corinthian church family and all the issues and problems that were going on there and feel that at certain points and times our families, and our marriages might resemble them as well. We have our fights, our quarrels, and our disputes with our children and our spouses.

And to a certain extent that is normal - Conflict is bound to happen when you have different people who have committed

themselves to living together. It is a myth that a good relationship, a healthy relationship has no conflict.

But often that conflict turns out like Corinth, and it turns into mayhem and craziness.

We see it in families and marriages all around us – well educated, talented gifted people who are executives, business leaders and so on whose conflicts at home escalate because of jealousy, quarrelling, adultery and turn into legal disputes – divorce, custody battles, child support cases and so on.

Where is the love?

Now you might think that this is different for those who are part of the church because at the very least we heard and believe in the gospel. But just like the Corinthian church, and just like those around us we are struggling with the same issues of jealousy, quarrelling, adultery, in families and between spouses. And these turn into legal disputes – divorce, custody battles, and child support cases and so on.

The statistics for Christians are no different than the national average.

Where is the love?

I think we would all agree if love were present things would be different.

But love in our English language is so hard to define - we use it in so many ways. We love hockey, we love our favourite band or McDonalds – we're lovin' it, we love our family, we love our friends, we love our cat and we love our spouse.

It's a nebulous mixture of feelings, actions and motivations which doesn't seem to last or make it through the years for many people.

The good news is that scripture is far more precise about love. Paul knows exactly what kind of love is needed for the Corinthians to get back on track and it's no different for us.

So Paul starts off "Now I will show you the most excellent way" and proceeds to define the word "Agape" which we translate as Love.

Now "Agape" is the most important thing you can have – Paul says.

In fact all your giftedness, talents, education, perseverance and charity work means nothing if you don't have "agape"

Well that's true isn't it – Corinth had a lot going for them but it wasn't producing any good fruit was it? That's often true for us and our relationships too.

Then Paul gives us this amazing, inspiring description of "agape"

It is patient, kind, doesn't envy, or boast, it's not proud or rude. It's not self-seeking, not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

It doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, and it never fails

This is the most excellent way to be! Or is it?

Is Paul telling the Corinthians how they should behave? We often treat this passage like it's a description of how we ought to try and love each other.

I can't tell you how many weddings I've been to where this passage of scripture is held up as the ideal for the young couple to model their love and commitment on. Maybe it was for your too?

And when you are in love and everything is starry-eyed you honestly believe you can do this.

But if this is a list of how to treat someone you've been married to for a while, I can only imagine how we might feel

Perhaps angry...

“Be patient and kind – do you realize what I've put up with?!”
Keep no record of wrongs – do you know what he/she did?!

Perhaps overwhelmed...

“I can't do all this, its too much I screw it up all the time – I try but I just can't do it”

Perhaps proud...

“I have no problem acting like this for them, but if they could just act like this for me, well ”

But Paul is not a taskmaster – he's a bearer of the gospel news. The church in Corinth did not start because Paul came in telling them how to behave.

He came and told them about the one who truly was “Agape”

Look at that list again and tell me if you do not see Jesus Christ described there.

It perfectly describes how Jesus acted towards others during his ministry, how God was acting towards us when Jesus offered his life to pay for our sins – Jesus defines “agape”

So instead of giving a list of behaviours that we should be attempting to mimic as we try to “agape” our spouse, or others Paul is reminding Corinth and us to look to Jesus Christ.

So why doesn't he just say that? Because the result of looking to Jesus Christ – continually, daily, and not just leaving the gospel as something you believed in a while ago is that these characteristics which describe “agape” will start to show up in your relationships.

Honestly friends, it is easy for the good news of what Christ did for us to become old news isn't it? And we fall back on our own efforts to live what Jesus defined.

But Paul continues on, reminding Corinth and us that such efforts in fact are childish and that maturing as Christians requires we give up such efforts and place our trust fully in Christ. When Perfection appears the imperfect disappears.

And we can count on progress, though we may only see little changes in our lives and relationship to start with, Paul promises that eventually we will know “agape” fully – we see a poor reflection of Christ's “agape” in our lives now, but one day, on the day Christ returns it will be a mirror image! So continue to focus on Christ and how in his ministry and actions he defines “agape” toward us!

And what happens is that the jealousy, quarrels, and disputes we have in our relationships become great opportunities to let the old news become good news again.

That's what Paul wants the Corinthians to see – they've messed up yes, but it's an opportunity to return to Christ.

We all mess up in our relationships and families but this is not cause for anger, despair, or pride – instead it's an opportunity to meet Christ again for all involved.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that love smoothes all things over, that serious problems can be swept under the rug of “I love you”

Instead “agape” is a foundation for our relationships, “Agape” is a shared common commitment between two people. “Agape” produces an environment in which differences, conflicts, and issues can be constructively worked on and in which relationship tools like counselling, personality profiles, and therapy are most effective.

“Agape” is Jesus Christ.

And it was Jesus Christ who said

“A new command I give you – “Agape” one another. As I have “Agaped” you, so you must “agape” each other.”

So let us “agape” each other, our families, and our spouses.

Where is the Love – friends it is right there (point to cross)

Amen.