

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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The challenge of loving each other – Joss Bray

We've started looking at the challenges of the early church as it was growing and developing.

It was being built into a body of believers who loved God and had found salvation in Jesus Christ.

These early Christians were focussed on the good news that God had sent his Son Jesus to them - and although he was crucified and died, he rose again to prove exactly who he was and that his teaching was the real deal.

They understood that through what Jesus had done, he had not only shown us what God was like – but he had taken the consequences of our sin himself on the cross.

The thing that separated people from knowing God had been defeated and dealt with and they knew the truth of what Jesus had said in John 14-

⁶ "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

They knew that this was the message of repentance – the message of turning from sin and of salvation - being saved - that needed spreading.

The church was God's way of doing this as Jesus said in Matthew 16 -
I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

This was a big deal – death defeated, the way to a new start, a way to knowing God and his love had opened and they were well up for it.

But this brought all sorts of practical challenges - especially as growth was very rapid.

People were added daily – and at one point, in Acts 2:

⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

They believed, were baptised and added to the church – all on one day – imagine that!

This resulted in there being all sorts of people in the early church.

Different faith backgrounds – Jews, gentiles, pagans, occultists etc.

Different nationalities – Israelis (Judeans and Samaritans), Greeks, Romans, Ethiopians, people with no status, and so on - and as the good news spread, many other nationalities were included as well.

Different social classes – slaves, soldiers, doctors, merchants, freedom fighters, fishermen, tax collectors, managers, homemakers, and so on.

Different levels of wealth – from those with absolutely nothing, to those with lands and houses to spare.

There were people with different levels of faith, some with their own agendas, some who were divisive, some who complained, some who were idle – and so on.

And of course – there older men, young men, older women, young women, widows, orphans, husbands, wives, children and babies.

The early church was a huge mix of all sorts of people.

They got on very well.... most of the time.

So, for example – in Acts 4 we read:

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

But sometimes things didn't go so well – you can read Acts 5 v1-11 about Ananias and Saphira – and the frankly startling results of dishonesty right at the start of the Church.

Sometimes they disagreed – so we read in Acts 15 v 36 – 41 – How best mates Paul and Barnabas disagreed so fundamentally that they separated and went on their own ways.

Teaching was needed all the way through the NT to address this issue of how to relate and behave with each other.

As you read the letters to the churches – its worth noting how much this comes up – it's a really important issue.

So how did they do it? How did they manage to love one another at all?

I think it's because they knew first and foremost that they were loved by God and this changed them fundamentally.

When people are loved – they are changed.

And in this church – we are very similar to the early church and we face the same challenges.

We need to be sure that God loves us, and we need to live in that foundation that drives the rest of our lives.

If we do not know that He loves us with a love that never fails – then we will not be able to love each other in the way he wants us to.

So – given all that – what are the practicalities of how we should behave to each other?

Let's read - 1 Corinthians 13 v1-3:

13 If I speak in the tongues^[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,^[b] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

This is the way of love – and the lesson is this – it's not so much what you do it's the way that you do it.

I could be the most tongue speaking, prophetic, wise, faith filled, generous, self-sacrificing person – but without love – I am a crashing failure, empty of anything good, and a nobody in the kingdom of God.

Larry Norman wrote – “Without love, you ain't nothing – you ain't nothing without love.”

That's a sobering thought isn't it?

And that applies to all of us – the church as a whole.

We could be the most miracle and wonder filled church.

We could be giving all our income away – not just half of it.

We could have the best social action and outreach projects.

We could even be persecuted for being Christians.

But if we do not have love – it all counts for nothing.

So, what should we look for in ourselves – in each other – in our church family – first and foremost – its love!

It is the thing that lasts. It is the foundation of everything else we do.

1 Cor 13 v 8 says:

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Now – does that mean all these other things are wrong – tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, self-sacrifice, generosity – not at all!

There is plenty of encouragement about doing these things in the bible – and we do need all of them.

But it's the way that we do them that counts.

Otherwise we are just going to be a noisy and empty collection of people who look good on the outside but have nothing lasting inside.

And this is of the utmost importance.

It should be the foundation of everything we do as a church and the way we relate to each other and others outside.

That is the challenge that we face – as did the early church.

So, what does it look like – to love?

1 Cor 13 v 4-7

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

So – are we kind to each other (gentle and caring)?

Do we envy each other?

Do we boast?

Are we proud?

Are we dishonouring others?

Are we self-seeking?

Are we easily angered?

Do we keep a record of wrongs?

Do we reject bad things?

Do we rejoice in truth?

Do we always protect each other, always trust each other, always have hope for each other and always persevere with each other?

Let's say it again - people are changed by love – as we are changed when we realise how much we are loved by God.

I have found that the more you treat people in this way – the more they change their way of behaving as well.

And the converse is true.

So, if we find that relationships aren't going too well – the first thing to do – and this is highly challenging – is to look at ourselves.

The question is – am I propagating love or is it something else?

If it is something else, then I need to change.

Then people may change around us.

If they don't – well, we have done the right thing – we've done something that counts for eternity and will never pass away.

So – you may say – does that mean, for example, that we trust everything that someone says?

Good question – and my answer is this:

Our approach to everyone is first and foremost one of love – the love that always trusts, hopes and perseveres.

On that basis – we can then have discernment from God about someone – or the situation or relationship.

Prime examples are the discernment given to Peter about Ananias and Sapphira.

Peter had himself been on the receiving end when Jesus was pretty clear to Peter about something he said which got the response "get behind me Satan". Jesus loved Peter – but on the foundation of that love, he could say something pretty harsh.

Interestingly, it didn't put Peter off – he didn't take the huff and walk away refusing to be a disciple any more. He knew that Jesus loved him.

So, we may discern when there are lies and deceptions – but if we come from a basis of love – then we can deal with it – and I believe we will be more effective in facing issues that need to be faced.

People are a lot more likely to receive correction and challenge when they know that they are loved.

In fact – it may be only those who truly love someone who care enough to challenge them in this way.

And – even if they don't respond – then that's not our problem – we have done the right thing.

We can then always trust, hope and persevere in the knowledge that God is the one who ultimately has the power to change people.

In the end – he is the judge – and we - and those we try to love - are accountable to him.

That is God's challenge to us.

Colossians 3 sums it up:

¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. ¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

And Hebrews 13:

¹³ Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.

So, let's agree to love each other – however different we are and however hard it is!

