

1 Corinthians 13 - Love Serves
Small group notes for the facilitator

Opener: If not this passage what is the best passage from Scripture to use for describing the love between a man and a woman?

This passage cannot be describing the love between a man and a woman (or a person and his or her best friend, parent, child, etc) otherwise the relationship that's being described is idolatry. Consider that as you read.

Read 1 Corinthians 13.

Q. What's the context of this passage and what seems to be the problem that Paul is dealing with specifically here?

A. The larger narrative is that of relationships in the church. These 3 chapters (12-14) are about Spiritual Gifts and Paul is combatting what appears to be a faction saying that speaking in tongues is a higher gift. That's why Paul specifically addresses this in verse 1 - the tongues of men (not meaning their native tongue but think more along the lines of Pentecost) and of angels (a heavenly language).

Q. Why are these Spiritual Gifts nothing without love?

A. Paul has already answered this back in 8:1 - knowledge (which can be a gift - 12:8) puffs up but love builds up.

The love that Paul's talking about in this passage is *agape* which is the self giving love. (John 3:16 - "For God so *agapaō* the world that he sent his only Son.") He's saying that Spiritual Gifts are nothing if you keep them for yourself, you have to give them away in service to build up the body.

Q. Verses 4-7 are the verses most often used in weddings. Why do you suppose this is? Is it appropriate?

A. It would be nice to think that at the start of a relationship that this kind of love is possible - this is an all out giving love which expects nothing in return. The problem is that Paul ties these things together saying that "love IS...". So when we're not kind to our spouse (or to whomever we would say we love) it would suggest that at that point we cease loving them!

This love is about someone who loves us unconditionally which can only be God. Try reading the verses with "God" or "Jesus" (and "he" instead of "it"). In verse 7 we could even say that this is our response - as a result of God's love for us, we can bear all things, believe all things, hope all things and endure all things.

So is it appropriate to use these verses at a wedding? The more like Christ we become the more we are able to love as he first loved us (1 John 4). So it's not inappropriate but it makes more of a statement of our standing before Christ than it does about how much we love another human being.

Q. From verses 8-10 what will happen to Spiritual Gifts and when?

A. They will pass away - there is an end to Spiritual Gifts being needed. Amazingly some people say this has already happened (cessasionists) at the end of the first century after the apostles died! But Paul says that the gifts will pass away when the perfect comes.

Q. What do the two metaphors in verses 11 and 12 mean?

A. They're both essentially about clarity? Another metaphor could be watching someone walking toward you in a fog; it's only when you can see them close up that you recognize who they are. This is the case with Spiritual Gifts - they're a temporary impartation of Jesus which we won't need when we have him face to face.

Q. How would you define faith and hope? Are they essentially the same thing?

A. They're very similar and in English we probably use the ideas interchangeably. We hope in an end point (resurrection) and we trust that we'll get there (faith).

Q. How is love greater than hope and faith?

A. Paul says that all three abide. Maybe you can explain this to me? My explanation is that we have hope of the resurrection because we want to be with a loving God (if he wasn't loving we wouldn't want to be with him). We have faith that we will ultimately spend eternity with him because of his act of love (the cross) and that he has never let us down before. However, once we achieve resurrection and see Jesus face to face what need is there for hope and faith? Yet Paul says they will abide? However, love is greater because it continues for eternity through our relationship with God.

Close: *Agape* love is only love when it's given away. As a church we call this serving one-another. How is God calling you to serve in his church?

Maybe you're already serving at maximum capacity in which case I would encourage you to consider how you can serve Christ through the more mundane parts of life (work, school, etc).