

Sermon 46: 1 Corinthians 13:5: Love is not selfish

OUTLINE

The question of self-love
The nature of true love

INTRODUCTION

‘Cure selfishness and you have replanted the Garden of Eden,’ one commentator says. Because of the fall our hearts which were once expansive and magnanimous and generous are now contracted and grasping. James tells us that this selfish drive is what causes the divisions between us, 4:1-2a, ‘What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.’ One old saint said that the worship of the idol of self has done more harm than the worship of any other idol in any other religion. The Corinthian church is a battleground that testifies to the truth that selfishness divides. Paul continues showing us how love which fulfills the law is the opposite of all the things that are tearing this church apart. ‘It does not insist on its own way.’ Self serves its own ends and brings about problems; love serves others and brings glory to God, peace in the church and a good witness before the world.

We have looked at the structure of this list and have noted that this is the only item that seems to stand on its own, and probably because it is such a big issue. Self-love; self-seeking; selfishness, we could spend a lot of time digging into this problem. Today as we consider this matter we have a particular issue that we need to address. We live in a world where self-love like the word pride has positive connotations, how do we negotiate the matter of self-love when love is not self-seeking? Today as we consider this matter we will look at the question of self-love; and the selfless nature of gospel love.

The question of self-love

‘It does not insist on its own way.’ You may be familiar with other translations that say ‘it is not self-seeking’ or ‘it does not seek its own.’ The Greek word for ‘insist’ behind our ESV translation is literally ‘seek’. Seek or insist both have the meaning of dedicated pursuit. This can be used positively when seeking for the kingdom of God, describing a relentless dedication to what is good. But as used here it is describing that disagreeable, unteachable, unmoving, stubborn, bullish, dog-with-a-bone like attitude that bulldozes others.

As with each of the 15 descriptions of love Paul is targeting particular problems in the Corinthian church. As we begin we need to think about where the Corinthians have been unloving by insisting on their own way. Numerous examples come to mind as we think about the very matter Paul has been addressing regarding spiritual gifts, where instead of the selfish way they have been putting themselves forward and making other parts of the body feel inferior because they do not have the right gifts. Paul is urging them to zealously pursue love. We could also think of the way in which people have been insisting on their own rights and taking others in the church to court to settle civil matters. We could think about the way they had been conducting themselves at the Lord’s Supper, thinking only about themselves, getting drunk and leaving other people

to get hungry. Self-seeking no doubt lies as a root cause at the base of all these problems but I think that the matter that Paul probably has in the forefront of his mind is the matter of food offered to idols. You will remember that Paul took three whole chapters to deal with this problem. And I want to remind you of two key verses at the conclusion of that discussion, 10:24; 33, 'Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.' 'just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.'

You will remember that the Corinthians felt vindicated, they had theological truth on their side, idols are nothing, all things belong to God, if someone copies what I do and sins and falls away that it their problem not mine. Firm in their personal beliefs, propped up with good argumentation, they were liberal in doing what they wanted at the cost of misleading others. Paul urged them to consider the example of the apostles and his own in particular how he became all things to all men in order that he might win them. Insisting on his racial identity or practices; even insisting on rights that were his like taking payment or eating meat, these rights were all put aside in order to serve others. Doing all for others good, doing all for God's glory; that is the selfless rule that is to drive our lives.

But insisting that you should put away self-love; that seeking your own is sin and harmful, this is no longer a message that is accepted in our Post-Christian world. The Self-Esteem movement has been in full throttle since the 1980s and is the new spirituality that many are turning to in a Post-Christian age. The Self-Esteem movement is not only being pursued in the place of Christianity, but there are Christian versions of it. You will hear many say today that religion is good for your sense of self. They will even quote Jesus from Matt. 22:37-39, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The claim is made that Jesus commands us to love ourselves. That Jesus was basically endorsing all that goes on in the name of self-love. 2 important points need to be made. Firstly, we can clearly see from Matt. 22:40 that Jesus is not giving 3 commands, to love God, neighbour and self, but only 2 commands, 'On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.' To take all of what is meant by self-love and import it into Jesus words is anachronistic imposition. Secondly, Jesus is assuming a natural self-love not commanding it, and this assumed self-love is being used to keep our love for others honest. Paul does something similar when talking about how husbands should love their wives in Eph. 5:28, 'In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.' Husbands what do you do when you are cold, you put on a jersey, so make sure your wife is warm too. What do you do when you're hungry? You eat, so provide food for your family too. When it comes to looking after ourselves we do all sorts of nice things for ourselves don't we? We don't just have bread and water, we get take outs, or a thick piece of meat carefully cooked to perfection. We don't wear rags but good quality clothing that we feel comfortable in. Jesus is not commanding self-love but assuming that each of us already loves ourselves, and he is keeping the love that we show to others honest. We so often settle for a minimalistic love, a token love, a gesture that soothes our conscience but doesn't actually meet a need. Jesus is challenging us to love in truth, and the 'as yourself' part is not an endorsement of modern schools of psychology but a way to bypass your excuses.

There are a couple of pot holes that we should probably talk about as we talk about self-love as the problem not the cure. Firstly, saying that we should not be driven by self-love is not advocating for a spiritual form of self-destruction that is so often driven by bad a legalistic theology. There is a false idea that God is happy if we are suffering, that suffering for its own sake is good, and obedience can only be good if it is somehow harmful to yourself. No, the Bible teaches us that true happiness is found in God, that God seeks our joy to be in Him not in idols, not in sin, but in what He made us for, Himself. God is not against happiness and satisfaction, He is the author of them, He is against idolatry not finding your happiness in Him and how He says you should live. Happiness and the desire to be happy are not sinful, but seeking our happiness in sin not God. To be against the sin of self-love is not to be against pleasure and happiness as a gift of God.

Secondly, I do want to raise an alarm. There is a wrong self-love message that is creeping into Christianity that is not being noticed and rejected. People will say things like 'You can't love God and others until you love yourself first,' and then usually quote Matt. 22. This is to make a non-commandment the first commandment. This is not the acceptance of ourselves in the gospel where we come to terms with ourselves as lost sinners, but loved by God and saved by His grace into being adopted children who can raise our heads because of what Christ has done for us and within us. Here is a definition of this other self-love, 'Self-love is an *introspective prioritization of self*, aiming at a deeper love and acceptance of self. It is a meditative focus on one's own positive traits. Self-love seeks freedom from negative thoughts about oneself — whether guilt or insecurity or even awkwardness. It is seen as the key to the love of others and the love of God, because as long as there is any discontent with self, we are unable to devote ourselves to these.'¹ This new cure all is promising a gospel like hope. Are you struggling obesity, love yourself; are you depressed, it is because you don't love yourself enough; are your relationships failing, it is because you have not learnt to love yourself first; are you struggling with the assurance of God's love, it's because you don't love yourself, knowing how good and great and precious you are. This version of self-love is a false gospel, it has a false anthropology denying that we are sinners and implying that we are good; it denies the law of God and what it calls sin. Today those who have sinful sexual desires are being told to love themselves the way that they are and any sense of guilt is because of a desire to please people, but loving yourself will make you stop caring about what people think. But God has spoken and call certain things sin, this form of self-love is actually self-abuse and self-deceiving. It offers false forgiveness as we are being encouraged to forgive ourselves for things that God has not forgiven but can forgive if we come to Christ. It is offering a false path of holiness as self-love admits what it cannot do and stops trying so hard, because it claims that others standards and people pleasing are why we strive. Compare this with Paul's striving for perfection even while saying he has not obtained it, knowing he will only obtain it in the resurrection. Beware of this false way of thinking that has man at the center and not God at the center. 2 Tim. 3:1-5, 'But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.'

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/do-you-love-yourself-enough>

The Corinthians did not have a better sense of self, they were not showing behavior that betrayed that they needed self-actualization. They were full of themselves. They needed to learn biblical love, the love that we receive from God in the gospel. Friends all of this to say that the Bible is still sufficient to address our heart and our problems. Paul is not outmoded and needing to be updated according to the new schools of thinking.

The nature of true love

Once again Paul puts the Corinthians sinful behavior in focus by showing what love is in the negative. Love is not what the Corinthians are busy doing. The Corinthians are insisting and seeking their own way, love is not that, love is opposed to that. On the one hand we have the Corinthians and our sinful behavior and on the other we have love, selfishness versus selflessness. Let us test ourselves to see if we are driven by love or self-love.

Selfishness takes for itself, but love gives of itself. It eats all the food before everyone has had some like the Corinthians at the Lord's Supper; but love goes without that all may have some. Selfishness enables itself while disabling others; but love is enabling. Imagine how this works in the body of Christ where one hand stops another hand from being able to move cutting off resources so that it is hindered and harmed, the Corinthians were doing this with their insistence upon their own gifts. Selfishness cannot partner it must always lead; love is able to enter into a cooperation. Self must have its own goals rule all, love is able to negotiate for what is best for all. Love is agreeable and able to tolerate differences, but self judges all that disagrees with itself. If you agree with what I say you are correct; if you disagree with what I say you are wrong. If you like what I like you have good taste. If you see the world the way I see it you have wisdom. If your opinion agrees with mine then by the measure of myself I permit it, you are smart like me. Self acts like God where all must do their will and judgement will fall upon those that do not; but love seeks the glory of God and the good of others not self. Self is incensed at any harm coming to what it has deemed precious and goes to war for its treasures; love suffers loss patiently distributing its treasures. Self seeks position and power, honour and authority to get more for self; love shoulders responsibility and authority to do more for others. Self is soft on its own sin but hard on others; love is hard on its own sins cutting off hands and gouging out eyes, but soft on others with a spirit of gentleness restoring them. Self inflates its righteousness casting a single righteous act as a habit or character; but diminishes its sin casting its bad habits and character as merely occasional failures. Love humbly admits its wrongs and does not broadcast its goods. Self is closed and only pursues relationships with others for personal gain; love is open and pursues relationships with others being interested in and hoping to benefit others. Self schemes to appropriate others and their things and their opportunities for themselves; but love is scheming and planning to bless others with their own things and opportunities. Self loves to hear praise; love gladly gives praise. How are we doing? Self we see intrudes itself into our marriages, our parenting, our schooling, our jobs, our church, even into our service and worship of God.

Compare the self-love and selfishness that rules our lives with the love that serves others in Christ. John 13:1-5, 'Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his

hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.' Christ's love is evident in Him washing our feet, in His humble service, in Him seeking our good at cost to Him.

And He goes on, v12-17, 'When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.' Now we do not have a practice of actually washing each other's feet, I have done it, it is a little awkward. Jesus gives shape to love and calls us to imitate. What struck me this week is something I had not realized before. We know that the washing of feet symbolizes Christ dealing with and washing away our sins. So how do we imitate Christ in this way? The point of the foot washing is not only to serve one another in love. But in particular it is to wash one another's sins. Now you can I cannot die for each others sins, we are not priests who can claim to absolve of sin. No but we can forgive those who have sinned against us. Imagine washing the feet of those who had sinned against you. We can help those in sin to get out of sin; we can pray for them; minister to them; be their accountability partners. Ministering to the dirty not the clean when it comes to sin.

But Jesus goes on, v34-35, 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' There is something different about the new commandment to the old commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. To love your neighbour as yourself is a type of natural law, a law of balance and reciprocity. Do to others as you would have them do to you, there is a return for love given which gives logic to this type of love. This is the love that grounds the common good, where we should love the society we are in so that the society we are in is healthy and we then benefit from that society. An evolutionary worldview could even potentially give an account for this ethic and law of loving others as yourself as mutually beneficial and ensuring survival. But the new command is different. Jesus is not loving His family, but His enemies; He is not loving those who benefit Him but who murder Him. His love for us does not depend upon the return we can give to Him justifying the expense. His love far outweighs any pay back we could give. His love to us is lop sided and has no logical balance to it. We do not add to His productivity, we are dead weight who have to be carried and enabled at every turn. This is the love that Paul is talking about in 1 Cor. 13:5, that does not seek its own. This is the love that we as believers have been called to emulate. This is the love that will stand out as disciples of Jesus love. Evolution kills the weak, we are to serve them; common sense says only invest in those who are worth it and will give something back; Jesus gave unconditionally. The message of our age is don't hurt yourself in giving to others; Christ gave all paying the highest price to love us.

The love that does not insist on its own way is not an immature non-assertive limp wristedness that is too weak to take advantage of others. No, the love of 1

Cor. 13:5 that does not insist on its own way is in imitation of Christ's selfless love. As we come to the table now observe this message. Every week we come to the table we are reminded of the true nature of saving love, not a love like the world gives, but a love that gave itself casting the mold for our own giving.