

Faith Stealers: Loveless Living

Title: Disappointment with God's people. When we are at the receiving end of loveless living, of being judged and that judgement comes from God's people...!

At WKURC we think of ourselves as a loving and welcoming Church – and that is often true. But not always. And not for everyone. And not on every Sunday. In fact we might be doing a bit better at the moment because we are all squashed together in the hall – what do you think?

But from time to time we definitely get it wrong! And that is a real shame. Now I know that we can't be perfect, so this is just a call to be a bit more perfect – to get it right a bit more often.

It is also a plea that we forgive each other when we get it wrong within the fellowship! And yet still to sort it out so that it is less likely to happen again in the future.

Earlier, Paul read to us from 1 Corinthians 13 about love – it is a high calling. 'love never fails' we are told in verse 8 – not, I suspect the actual experience of any of us! Even in the most loving of relationships there are moments of selfishness. So in the complex and varied body of the church I am not at all surprised that we fail to live up to this.

I'm just going to measure my perfection against this list and see how I do – perhaps you should mentally join in too:

1	Patient			
2	Kind			
3	Not envious			
4	Not boasting, or			
5	Not proud or			
6	Not self-seeking			
7	Not dishonouring			
8	Not angry and			
9	does not seek retribution			
10	Does not delight in evil			
12	Rejoices in the truth			
13	Protects			
14	Trusts			
15	Hopes			
16	Perseveres			

Hmm – 6 out of 16 seems pretty much like a fail for me! Perhaps you did a bit better. I know that I am not the person in the Church with the most natural social skills – although I also know that God has changed me lots over the past 4 ½ decades of living in the Kingdom.

And some of us really are very gifted, which is great. But as with all things we cannot just leave being a loving church to just the gifted ones. No, it is the job of everyone.

So, I would now like to seek your forgiveness as I try not to offend anyone, but also try to raise the main points which this title is clearly meant to deal with.

Because lovelessness is not just about being unloving, it is about complacency. Jenny likes to say that the opposite of love is not hate! No, it is indifference. That destroys marriages more than anything. And it destroys all relationships – and prevents them from even getting started. We've probably all come across people who have been put off the gospel message due to the conduct of Christians.

And here is my first point – is it better to be right than to be loving? Is the behaviour of a visitor something that we have deal with or accept? Are noisy children to be glared at, shushed, or tutted at – or should our good humour prevail?

'Well,' you might say, 'we don't have any ill-mannered children in our church!' Perhaps that is because the first time they came we misbehaved and did not love them and their parents enough!

It's a bit like the church ... I discussed a disabled wc with a long time ago....

One of things that we have to recognise is that our welcome is a vital part of our witness and that we cannot expect people who arrive at our meetings to 'fit in'. They may come from a very different church or from no church background at all – and it is not our job to squeeze them into the WKURC mould (if there is one)! One of our strengths is that we are a very varied church with a massive breadth of what I call churchmanship. And that is fantastic. We are sort of the ultimate in ecumenism in one congregation!! But that does not mean that we are fantastic at helping new folk to find themselves comfortable in our fellowship.

But we need to.

We really do need to be better at it – well I certainly need to be better! What about you?

We have got to recognise that although many of us might feel uncomfortable with greeting new people – they will be feeling more uncomfortable about being new. When we are talking to our friends after church we need to always be aware that there could be others that need our attention more.

And then there are the people who possibly feel like we will condemn them before they even walk through the door! There we have to be very caring!

Who would they be? Who could they be, you might wonder.... Well just think about the things that the Church has made an issue about down the ages and ask yourself how welcome you might or might not feel in their shoes – (actually the good thing is that some of these people are already here and [I hope] know that level of acceptance.)

Obviously I am talking about people who perhaps have a criminal record or addiction; or single parents; or those who are long term unemployed. Sometimes these people can feel very rejected by society – and we must not join in! God is on their side. He loves them with

an unstoppable love – we cannot dare to do less! And I know you – you do not want to love them less nor be discriminatory.

But the group I am most concerned about are homosexual people – the church has done a terrible job at offering love and acceptance to them. Jesus offers the gift of salvation to all – he does not leave anyone out! Dare we do different?

The trouble is that we can put Law before Love. But there is no excuse for that. We read in 1 Cor 13:13

But the greatest of these is love.

There is no excuse for not exhibiting Love. “Was that loving?” I ask myself. Sadly the answer is often no – but it needs to be yes – it has to be yes.

And then I hear about ‘tough love’! Hmm. It might be tough but it is usually not love. Sometimes it might be required! Mostly it is an excuse for taking the easy, nasty, unloving route and then justifying myself.

“But Jesus did it” you might say! Yes, the most socially astute person who ever lived might have done it under the perfect influence of the Holy Spirit – I don’t think I come anywhere close – sorry – some of you know that only too well.

Unlike Jesus we just don’t have as much grace as is needed.

Then there is Gossip and it’s equal and opposite problem – Secrecy. On the one hand it is not right to speak of others without them having an input; or to belittle others. On the other hand if God blesses us and we do not share it then I think the fellowship is harmed too. If we slag off others we damage the fellowship. But if we do not share our problems prayerfully with Christian that we trust then we harm ourselves and we do not allow God to work in our lives and give others the chance to be part of that work of grace. But having had something shared with us we need to be trustworthy in where that goes next.

Finally, let’s not forget about the people who only manage to get here occasionally. Those who are ill, older, those who are discouraged and those who just don’t see why being in church every Sunday is particularly important. Let’s make sure they get the right sort of welcome which suits them and helps them to know how we value their fellowship and have missed them. I’m not very good at that – I always fear that I’ll say something stupid – but that does not mean that I should not do it. I probably need to get over that.... prayerfully!

So we need to escape the Loveless Living trap – in Church life particularly. But actually I’ve found that all that I’ve learned about being more open in the context of the fellowship has changed me in the world of work. Just the other day... at the exhibition... I thought that this would have been pretty alien to me just 10 years ago – it is good to know the God is still changing me. Still a work in progress after 45 years. God’s not finished with me yet.

He’s not finished with you either.

Be willing to change – desire the transforming power of God in your life – search for it. Cooperate!

Change me – change me – make me more fit to serve you. May my life be less loveless – more loving.

May yours. – let’s just check those points again:

- 1. Patient**
- 2. Kind**
- 3. Not envious**
- 4. Not boasting, proud or self-seeking**
- 5. Not dishonouring**
- 6. Not angry and does not seek retribution**
- 7. Does not delight in evil**
- 8. Rejoices in the truth**
- 9. Protects**
- 10. Trusts**
- 11. Hopes**
- 12. Perseveres**

End with prayer...

1 Corinthians 13 (NIVUK)

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.

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.

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. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.