

## **LOVE IS....**

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### **1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13**

*13 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

First Corinthians 13 is often referred to as the ‘*Love Chapter*.’ But you and I know there are many definitions of “*love*.” The English language uses the same word to refer to many different things. But English is not the only one.

In our Bible Study we are currently engaged in a study that reminds us that we should do what I have often told you that we should do, and that is we should look at the “*Context*” is what helps us to understand the meaning of the words that are used. On Wednesday we took a look at this very chapter in our Bible Study and were asked to take a look at the “*Context*” in which this chapter was written.

The author gave us a crash course on the four main ways in which we find ourselves using the word “*love*.”

First, we were reminded that like English the ancient Greek had many different ways of referring to love. ONE is *eros*. This one refers to erotic or passionate love. SECOND is *philia*, which refers to the word used to refer to love shared in friendship. THIRD there is *storge*. The type of love used in family relationships between sibling or parent and child. FINALLY, there is *agape* which is the love of God. It also came to be known as love within the Christian community that was growing up at the time of Paul’s writing. In fact, it is the type of love that Paul was convinced the early Church should relate to each other. The love that should imitate the love of God.

That is where we run into the problem within the Church today. With all the hatred and violence of this present age, one cannot help but ask, “*Where’s the love?*” Now more than ever, the Christian community needs to shine the light of Christ’s unconditional *agape* love to a world in darkness. But how can the “*Church*,” with the capital “*C*,” accomplish this mission if it is divided against itself?

Such was the case for the believers in Corinth. Debates and controversies ripped apart those who claimed to be followers of Christ. Just as is the case within the modern-day church today.

It is by chance that the passage I had planned to use as my text is the same passage that was at the heart of our Bible Study this past Wednesday. I have already warned those there this past

Wednesday that they would hear some of the things about this “love chapter” that they had already heard.

Let me give you a brief summary of I Corinthians so we all have the CONTEXT for the chapter I just read for you.

Paul was writing to a group of people he knew quite well. He had founded this church on his second missionary journey and had spent more time with this congregation than he had with any of the others he had founded with the exception of Ephesus. When you have spent time with a congregation you get to know them and hope they had heard some of your sermons and had, and would continue to, respond with others in ways that God had shown love through Christ and through how he had taught them to love each other.

After his time with them Paul moved on to help in the founding of other church's. After a while he got a letter from a friend of his and one who was a member of the Corinthian Church. In the letter he was told that things were not going well in the Church he had helped create.

They had a problem of *hierarchy*. You might say well there is a hierarchy within every organization and in many churches you will find that people work very hard to make sure that hierarchy is maintained. But you remember that Paul had the idea that within God's family, as represented in the Church, that there is no such thing as “*Jew or Greek; there is neither slave or free; nor is the male and female, for you are all one in Christ.*” He had shared this with the letter he had written to the Galatians.

But one of the first things Paul was told about the Church at Corinth was that there were the old ways of viewing the church emerging again. In the first chapter of this book Paul says he has heard that they are now ranking their pastors. Some said they belonged to Paul, others said belong to Apollos, other that they Cephas, or others said they only listened to Christ. They had developed a rift within the church when it came to leadership. In the development of a hierarchy of leadership the messenger took priority over the MESSAGE.

Paul had to remind them that they were all really co-workers in caring for the communities' well-being and for them to stop dividing themselves on the issue of which of messengers were better than the others. They were all instruments of God in their behalf.

Another prominent division among them was the haves and the have-nots. This was even seen within the church when they had potlucks, the meals they shared when they shared the Lord's Supper. The way Jesus conducted meals was on an even level. In fact, one of the charges made against Jesus is that he ate with sinners and saints as well and they all sat at the same table. But in the short time between when Paul had helped establish the Church based on that type of love that Paul said they should have for each other he was informed that the Corinthians had devolved into looking more like the society rather than what the Church was supposed to be like.

They were beginning to look like anything but the community that Paul told them the Church was supposed to look like.

In the ancient world the church mirrored the culture more often than the world mirrored the Church. In the larger community, or what the Bible often referred to as “*the world,*” you only ate with those of similar wealth and class, and women were not allowed to eat at the table with the men. In fact, in this church in Corinth often the rich who could show up at the precise time they expected the food to be available and even if others had not yet arrived they would go ahead and eat with their friends and there would be no food left for those who were poor and not friends of the richer people.

Often, in the modern church I have noticed in church potlucks we do not want to wait for much of anything either. We want it to happen the minute the benediction is given. So instead of making sure everyone is present we leave people out and don't wait for the stranger. We mark our table

places so we only eat with our friends and leave no place for others that we would prefer not to have make good conversation with or learn about new people.

You see, the church was becoming divided, And then to add to that Paul has been told that there is a competitive spirit that helped develop a hierarchy of gifts. There were those in the church who felt their gift was more important than another.

In the chapter just before the “*love chapter*” we find Paul beginning chapter twelve with the words: “*Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be ignorant..*” Then he continues in verse 4: *4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*”

Paul is saying that each person within the Church has been given their own gifts and they are all to be used to make sure the Church is able to function as a Church. The hierarchy problem arose again.

The person who gave the message would be considered more important than the person who provided the worship space.

All these kinds of things were tearing the church apart and contributing to a mistaken picture of what the church was supposed to be like. You might remember in the Acts of the Apostles that one of the things that overwhelmed the culture around the early church was the love the people within the church had for each other. But now they no longer said that about the church in Corinth.

In particular, pride over certain spiritual gifts prompted Paul to remind them of the most important quality missing in that family of faith, which is love.

The deadly tendency for disputes to arise over secondary issues forces us to examine how love responds to truth. Unfortunately, church conflicts and denominational controversies beg the same question, “*Where's the love?*” and the definition of Love.

So, in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul poetically illuminates where the love of Christ should be found.

FIRST, Christ's Love Should Be Found in Our Gifts.

Paul begins by identifying the explaining to his disappointing “church” the futility of exercising spiritual gifts without love. The Holy Spirit gives every believer at least one gift ( Rom. 12:6) . Whether or not one uses it constructively depends upon the attitude of the heart. Genuine love reaches beyond the parameters of selfishness to the concern for all believers and to the larger community.

However, the Corinthians valued self-importance. Sure, they used their spiritual gifts, but only as it brought glory to themselves. Sensing this self-focus. Paul responds by saying in effect, “*If I were Superman and could leap tall buildings in a single bound but only used my power selfishly, then I gain nothing.*” The temporal praise of today vanishes in the shadow of the eternal reward of our God who demonstrated authentic love on the cross. To follow Christ's example, we must exercise our gifts in a *spirit of love* for the edification of others.

II. Christ's Love Should Be Found in Our Actions

After addressing internal motivation, Paul reveals specific qualities of love to be pursued and potential pitfalls to be avoided. For love is more than an orientation, it is an activity. By the visible demonstration of this virtue, society gains insight into the true identity of Christ and his followers.

One of the major misconceptions in our culture evolves around the definition of love. The world tends to define love according to psychological dispositions and sensual appetites. People fall "in love," one might have a "lover," or a couple might "make love." These fallacies ultimately return to a self-ego understanding of how love satisfies the self.

Paul reminds us that real love does not seek to satisfy empty gratifications or to fulfill personal ambitions. Instead, it manifests enduring kindness toward others and righteous zeal for truth.

### III. Christ's Love Should Be Found in Our Maturity

One of the greatest ironies in life is that the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. As technology advances exponentially, scientists have begun to admit that they are left with more questions than answers.

Believers who think they have God figured out should listen to the scientists, and to Paul. For in the concluding verses of this chapter, Paul exposes the imperfections of a faith that dogmatically clings to partial truths. While Christians affirm the objective truths revealed in scripture, they should admit the limitations of all that can be known. Children make wild boasts about their abilities, but mature disciples humbly await that day when perfect truth will be perfectly known. In this way, love triumphs over arrogance as we walk united in humility and respect.

As the church seeks to proclaim good news, let our actions speak as loudly as our words. We need faith, and we need hope. But greater than these, we need to find love.

Sometimes we need to hear something in different words than those who are accustomed to hearing. Some of you have heard of The Message version of the scriptures. It is not one I read on a regular basis but sometimes it is helpful to get a new perspective.

Hear Paul's words to the difficult Corinthians Church as he tries desperately to keep his beloved church from imploding on itself.

*If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," Doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, Doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end. Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled. When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good. We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us! But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.*