

1Corinthians 13:1-13

1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

## ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

My generation had a lot to say about love. “All you need is love.” Right?

Paul and John Lennon seem to be in agreement on this point. Love is the most important thing in our life.

The Apostle Paul said that we can speak like an angel, we can predict the future, we can have the best education, we can make significant sacrifices, our faith can be strong enough to move mountains, but if we don't have love, we gain nothing.

Love really is all we need. Thank you Paul, John, Ringo, and George for giving us that helpful tidbit of advice. But, if love really is all we need, then what is this thing called love? How do we define it?

We all know that there are different kinds of love. There is the love that we have for our family. There is the love that we have for that special someone. I can even say in all honesty that I “love” ice cream.

Love is not a very precise word in the English language. Using the word love might give us a warm fuzzy feeling. But, if we’re going to buy into the idea that “all you need is love” we better define that word very carefully.

That’s the purpose of today’s lesson.

## AGAPE

Paul wants the Corinthians to think about the true meaning of love. Love according to Paul is more than an emotion. Love is also an action. Love is something that you do. Love is a choice. Love is an act of the will.

Now this goes against all that we are taught about love. We talk about falling in love as if it were as easy as falling off a log.

But, Paul talks about love in a different way. Love is hard work. Love requires sacrifice. Love means always having to say you’re sorry. Love means receiving and offering forgiveness.

And love begins with God. The Bible tells us that God is love. (1 John 4:16) And so if we want to embrace the way of love we must begin with God.

The Greek word translated love in this passage is “agape”. If there’s one Greek word that everyone knows, it’s this one. “Agape” we are told is a special word that was often used to speak about the unconditional love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

If we want to see what God’s love looks like, we have to look no farther than the life and death of Jesus. In Jesus we see a down to earth picture of God’s love and forgiveness.

But, the Apostle Paul wants the Corinthians to remember that the love of God as revealed in Jesus has a claim on us. This picture of grace is more than a painting to be admired. It is a blueprint for living.

John in his first letter does tell us that God is love, but he goes on to say in that passage if we want to abide in God, if we want to experience the presence of God, we do that through abiding in love. To say it another way, when we participate in the costly love of God as revealed in Jesus, we abide in love and we abide in God.

## THE GONG SHOW

But, like many things in life this is easier said than done. Instead of seeking the self-sacrificing love of God as revealed in Jesus we seek other things. Mainly we seek power and the approval of others.

That, of course was the problem in the Corinthian Church. They had tried to replace the cross of Christ with a crown of glory. They had turned Christ's call to humble service into a plan for self-promotion.

And this caused conflict in the church.

There was conflict over leadership. There was conflict over theology. There was conflict over morality. There was conflict over who had the best spiritual gift.

The church at Corinth was in many ways a remarkably successful church. They were indeed a very gifted people. But, they lacked the most important gift, the gift of love.

And they lacked this gift because they did not pursue it. Instead they pursued their own agenda. They pursued their own goals. And this created a church that had significant problems.

Sadly, this sounds a lot like the church today.

There is such an emphasis upon the spectacular. We talk way too much about personal success and glory and not nearly enough about sacrifice and forgiveness.

And when we do this, when we import the ways of the world into the church, it introduces a discordant note into the symphony of faith.

Paul said it's like the sound of a gong or a clanging symbol introduced into the music at the wrong time.

Sometimes during choir practice Mark will introduce a discordant sound just to keep us on our toes. And one of his favorites is sounding a gong at the end of a piece.

We all have a good laugh at that musical joke.

But, we would be horrified if he actually did that on Sunday morning. The gong and the clashing symbol just do not fit with an anthem of praise to God.

And in the same way a church without love at its heart strikes the same kind of discordant note.

## CHARITY

So what is this love that we need? What does this love look like in action?

Some of you may remember that the King James Version of the Bible translated the Greek word "agape" with the word charity instead of love.

When we think of the word charity we think of some worthy cause that is asking for a contribution. But, in days gone by the word charity was often used to mean an attitude of grace, a tolerant attitude.

Last week I mentioned Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address. He said that going forward the country should have malice toward none and charity toward all.

Now Lincoln knew that the country was bitterly divided. When you lose a loved one in battle, you don't have warm fuzzy feelings toward the people who did it. But, it might be possible to eventually let that angry past go and move on.

It would be hard. It would be a struggle. There would be many setbacks. There would be many who would want to take revenge. But, if the country were going to survive the country as a whole would have to get beyond those feelings.

I think the reconciliation that took place after the Civil War is a good example of what Paul is talking about when he talks about love. Love refers to the hard work of building a community based upon grace and forgiveness.

It does not come naturally. It is not easy. But, it is possible through the power of the Spirit. God enables us to do what we cannot do on our own.

### STEADFAST LOVE

Listen again to how Paul describes love. First, Paul describes love in a positive way. Love is patient, and love is kind. The word translated patience means to be slow to anger, to be long-suffering, to be patient with the injuries of others.

The Bible often describes God as the One who is patient. Over and over again in the Old Testament we read about the steadfast love of God. God's love is consistent and constant. This steadfast love is in contrast to the fickle nature of God's people.

Even when God's people were disobedient, God did not leave them. The love of God persevered. God kept calling His children back to the Promised Land. God kept offering his people a way back home.

And if we are to emulate God's love we too must be patient. We too must bear with people. We too must be kind when the natural tendency is to react with anger or frustration.

### SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Then there is a second set of characteristics that define love in a negative way. Paul tells us what love is not. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.

In other words, we bend over backwards to be kind to people, but in so doing we do not compromise the truth. We do not love people by promoting a way of life that goes against what God tells us is right. This would be like a parent who lets a child do whatever he or she wants. This is not love or kindness. It is being irresponsible.

Paul put it this way in his letter to the Ephesians. We are to speak the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:15)

This has always been a delicate balancing act. On the one hand we must be long suffering and patient and kind and forgiving to others in the name of Christ. But, on the other hand we cannot rejoice in unrighteous behavior.

Some people in the Corinthian church were actually celebrating behavior that was immoral. They didn't think that sin was a problem. The more they sinned; the more opportunity for God to forgive them. God would forgive them because he was in the forgiving business.

But, Paul was saying, "Don't misunderstand when I say that you bear with and forgive people. The good news is not that you can settle down and get comfortable with your sins. The good news is that you can be saved from your sins."

However, Paul immediately tips the scale back on the side of patience and forgiveness when it comes to love. He knew that all of us go rather quickly from speaking the truth in love to speaking the truth in self-righteous judgment.

He writes that love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Now this doesn't mean that we are naïve in our evaluation of others. It just means that we wish all people well.

I like the way John Wesley interprets this. He says out of Christian love we are constrained to put the "most favorable construction on everything". We give people the benefit of the doubt. And we pray for their salvation even when we have to endure injustice at their hands.

MORE TO COME

Notice how far we have come from any worldly definition of love. Paul tells us that this sacrificial and self-giving love is a mark of spiritual maturity. It is the mark of one who is looking toward the future, God's future.

Think about all the things that pass away in this world. When I was a boy my daddy used to say, "I've forgotten more than you've learned." He had a point. Knowledge comes and goes as does every skill in life. Any talent or gift that we have is temporary.

But, the one thing that lasts is love, not just any love but the love of God as revealed in Jesus.

When you look back on your life what do you remember? What stands out?

I suspect some of your strongest memories are about people who loved you, people who forgave you, people who gave you the benefit of the doubt, and people who were kind to you. Those acts of love and forgiveness stand out.

And for those of us who have come to faith those acts of love were what led us to Jesus.

But, faith is also driven by the sense that we are not what we are called to be. Something is lacking in our life. There is more to come.

In a sense all of us are children when it comes to the life of faith. Our love is lacking. We are all immature.

Paul says that it's like we "see in a mirror dimly but one day we will see face to face."

In the ancient world they didn't have good mirrors like we have. Instead, they had polished metal that gave a somewhat distorted view of reality. It was much different from seeing a person face to face.

Paul is saying that when it comes to God's future we have a vision problem. We can't see clearly what is really important. Even our best efforts at love often fail miserably.

But, we do not lose heart because our incomplete and distorted understanding of love will be made complete. Now our view of reality is distorted and sinful. One day we will see clearly.

He's talking about eternity. He's talking about the hope of the resurrection.

## DUTY VERSUS DESTINY

The more I study Paul's first letter to the Corinthians the more I understand that it is a theological masterpiece. I Corinthians 13 is not just a nice little poem stuck in the middle of the letter to change the mood. It is the heart of a powerful and coherent message. Paul is leading the Corinthians away from their narrow and debilitating focus on the present and refocusing them on eternity.

This last line points to the fact that though our experience of God's love is incomplete, there is more to come. And that more is expounded in the marvelous 15<sup>th</sup> chapter where he talks about the power and hope of the resurrection.

To say it another way we live for the future, God's future. Our present experience is incomplete and flawed. But, we live in the hope of a greater future.

I Corinthians 13 is not just telling people how to live, to be kind and forgiving and loving. It's not just a moralistic passage telling us to try harder to be good. This passage is not primarily about reminding us of our duty to love. It's been my experience that if we think of something as a duty we often are less likely to do it.

But, I Corinthians 13 is not telling us that love is our duty. I Corinthians 13 is telling us that love is our *destiny*.

Love is how we participate in eternity here and now. Love is the language of faith. Love is the way we speak with Jesus. Love is God's future breaking into our present reality. Love is the food we eat in the Kingdom.

If we have an eternal hope, it enables us to live today in a different way. And the more we live in this love the more our hope for the future is increased.

N.T. Wright wrote,

“This is why we pray, ‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.’ It isn't a bargain we make with God. It's a fact of human life.



Not to forgive is to shut down a faculty in the innermost person, which happens to be the same faculty that can receive God's forgiveness. It also happens to be the same faculty that can experience real joy and real grief. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Our passage for today tells us that love never ends. Love abides. God's forgiving love is the one thing that remains when everything else has fallen.

### CROSS-SHAPED LOVE

And Love is, at its heart, in the shape of a cross.

Paul wrote at the very beginning of his letter to the Corinthians that this was the center of what he believed and trusted. He wrote,

"For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

The cross has always been a stumbling block for Christians and non-Christians alike. God loved us so much that He sent His Son into the world, and what did the world do? The world killed him. It would seem that when we killed Jesus, we killed off our last best chance at love.

But, the Bible teaches us that love did not die on the cross.

The forces of self-betrayal, they die. The self-justifying lies, they fail. Indeed, the Bible teaches us that the final enemy, death itself, is crucified on that cross. On the cross we do not see the collapse and failure of love, but love's faithfulness. On the cross we see love's victory despite the worst we can do to one another.

Paul points to the one place in our history where love might finally be called a failure, and it is at this place where love steadfastly hangs on. In the cross, the empty cross, Paul sees the guarantee that the one thing that still stands when all else is fallen is love, the love and triumph of God in Jesus Christ.

That love changed the world, and it created a community of people who were sustained by that hope. Read the testimony of the New Testament. Every phrase and every line is written because of love prevailing when all else had failed.

And it is that same love which calls out to us this very day. It is that same love which calls us away from a world that elevates rudeness to an art form and killing to a science. It is that same love which calls us away from a life of unfulfilling self-absorption to a life of selfless, yet fulfilling service. It is that same love which calls us to give up everything so that we might gain our soul.

Once again we celebrate communion, the Lord's Supper.

Do you want to see love clearly? Consider the words and actions of our Lord Jesus. He told his disciples, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15:13 (NRSV)

And then, on the "same night in which he was betrayed," he took bread and blessed and broke it and said, "This is my body which is broken for you." He took the cup and said, "This is my blood shed for you."

He died that we might live. In him we learn about God's forgiveness. In him we have the hope of life eternal.

Paul was right. Sometimes that hope seems dim. There is much that we don't understand on this side of eternity.

But, one thing is sure. If we put that hope into action, if we love as he loved and forgive as he forgave, we will begin to have more and more faith in that eternal hope.

Love will abide with us both now and forever.

Amen.