

"The greatest of these is love"

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Date: 28 April 2024

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[0:00] I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 13. It's on page 1140 of your pew Bible.

Intentionally, I thought we should read the whole chapter again today. So that it can hit us as it did last week. We went through the first three verses.

Verse 31 and the first three verses last week. We'll pick up from verse 4 this morning. I want to ask if you recognize these lyrics.

Nothing you can make that can't be made. Love. No one you can save that can't be saved. Love.

Nothing you can do. But you can learn how to be you in time.

Love. It's easy. All you need is love. All you need is love. Love. All you need is love. Love.

[0:59] Love is all you need. Who sang that? He's being very much more particular. The Beatles, right? Yeah. John Lennon. The Beatles.

Right. The Beatles. Love is all you need. Right. That's not what we're going to talk about today. But the Beatles were not trying to explain Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13.

Undoubtedly, their notion of love is romantic love. It's a feeling rather than an action or a way of being. And as we said last week, this is not what we have in this chapter, these verses.

This is not sentimental, mushy, fluffy love. It's not a sentimental wedding reading as an ode to romantic love.

Rather, what we have here in 1 Corinthians is one of the most stinging rebuke imaginable in all of the New Testament. The Corinthians would have been, at the reading of this, would have been squirming in their seats as this was read aloud to them in the church.

[2:12] Paul's letter was read aloud to them. And I think we are meant to do the same as we read this and as we sit under the reading of it. To squirm a bit. To be uncomfortable. Remember in chapter 12, Paul asked us to consider how we do ministry in the church.

To see our gifts in its various ways in which God has given it to us. To use those gifts for the good of the body of which we are members.

The body of Christ. The church. The body of Christ, the church, is characterized by what? By mutual care. All willing to use our gifts to care for and honor one another.

The one ready to serve the all within the body. All for one and one for all. That can only actually be true in the church.

Mutual dependency and honor in which no one in the body of Christ is left behind or excluded. And Paul goes on to show that all of it, all of those using of those gifts, must be ruled by the principle of love.

[3:31] Shown in chapter 13. In the first three verses, we see that love is the non-negotiable. Love is the indispensable ingredient that must be in operation among the people of God.

Without love, Paul tells us, all our giftings and exploits amounts to nothing. Without love, he says, you are a noisy gung.

Without love, your faith, no matter how great it is, makes you nothing in God's eyes. And what of a life of incredible service? Either in radical generosity of your money or even the great sacrifice of your life in martyrdom.

Paul says, even in those situations, without love, you gain nothing from all those works. Love is essential.

All our Christian activity comes from nothing without love. Love is vital. It is not like the gifts that differ in the distribution in the body. We all have different gifts within the body.

[4:42] But we are all called to operate in those gifts, in the context, in the setting of love.

Love is the lifeblood. Not the gifts. Love is the lifeblood that makes it all operate in an acceptable way to God. As such, the truth here is that we all need love.

That's the one thing we can't do without. And so, Paul now goes on from verse 4 to 7 to give us a character sketch of love.

Paul goes on to tell us of this agape love. You will note in verse 4 to 7 that love is not merely a feeling or showy display.

Rather, it is vibrant action. It's a way of being and thinking that bears fruit in our actions and in our disposition.

[5 : 44] First, verse 4, love is patient and kind. Here Paul says, love waits patiently and shows kindness.

The Old Testament description of God uses this word to describe Yahweh. Long-suffering.

God is patient. God is long-suffering. Not quick to anger or quick to punish, but abounding in mercy, in kindness.

He blesses us when we deserve wrath. And St. Peter says this of God in the second epistle. In 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 9, he says this, The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise.

As some count slowness. But rather, He is patient towards you. Not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

[6 : 52] God is patient. God is long-suffering. And Proverbs 19 says this, A person's insight gives him patience. And his virtue is to overlook an offense.

That's a person who is Christ-like. His patience, a person's insight gives him patience. And his virtue, there's a virtue, to overlook an offense.

And so, Jesus deals with us in this way, isn't it? Isn't this a description of our Lord? Jesus deals with us in this way. And we, ourselves, are also called to do likewise.

How beautiful will it be if we can relate to one another in the body of Christ, in patience.

Not weighing one another's offenses, but overlooking them. Being patient with one another as our Heavenly Father is patient with us.

[7 : 52] As we are progressively being sanctified. That's what love is. Love is patient. And love does not envy or boast.

It is not arrogant or rude. You know, in the context of the Corinthians, the Corinthians burn with envy against one another. Paul had said of them in chapter 3, verse 3, that there is jealousy and strife among them.

That's what's going on in the Corinthian church. And here Paul is saying, love is not boastful. It doesn't go around being braggadocious. Seeking man's empty praise.

Rather, love serves faithfully. Sometimes even quietly. Not out of resentment, mind you, but joyfully. Knowing that its service is unto the Lord. Love is not arrogant or rude. Arrogance.

[8 : 57] We've been hearing that word throughout this epistle of 1 Corinthians. Another word that Paul uses for arrogant is puffed up. And Paul says here, as Paul says earlier of the Corinthians in chapter 8, verse 1, he says, they are puffed up.

They're arrogant. Their knowledge is puffed up. Arrogance is being inflated with one's own importance. Self-importance. Arrogance is being conceited and proud.

And what happens when one is that way? One always draws attention to the self. This is the opposite of the mind of Christ we're called to have.

Remember Jesus Christ in Philippians 2. Jesus Christ who was in the form of God, yet he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.

But rather he emptied himself. The God of the universe, the creator of all things, emptied himself by taking the form of a servant.

[10 : 06] Whereas in a local church full of puffed up people, like that of Corinth, no one is emptying themselves and serving one another.

The opposite is true. They are making demands of other people. Unable to, as one commentator puts it, they are unable to place constraints upon their self-will.

But instead they are behaving improperly and rudely in their disposition to one another. That's what's going on in the Corinthian church. But love is the opposite of that.

And Paul goes on and says, love is not preoccupied with the interests of the self. Love is selfless. Love is concerned with honoring the other and not insisting on its own way. Now this is the antithesis of self-love, which is preached in our culture today.

[11:17] What does the culture say to us? The culture tells you that you can fall out of love when things get hard. When you're not getting anything from the relationship anymore.

In other words, when you're not being served, find someone or somewhere else that will serve your interest. Self-love.

That's not the gap in love that is described here in 1 Corinthians 13. And sadly, this consumerist, self-seeking love is rampant in the modern church today as well.

Christians today behave like the ones in Corinth, insisting on standing on their rights without regard to a brother or sister or fellow brother or sister who might be destroyed as a result of doing so.

But here, Paul shows us that a gap in love is not possessive. It never seeks to use others for its own selfish ends.

[12:26] Rather, love sacrifices its own for the sake of others. And what happens if your needs are the most important thing?

If you're all concerned about insisting on your own way and your way is the most important thing and those needs are not being met, what happens? It naturally leads to irritability and to resentment.

But Paul again reminds us that love is not irritable or resentful. It is not easily angered. It is patient and kind.

It overlooks offenses. If patience is lacking and self-importance and conceit are allowed to fester among us, naturally, it will create an atmosphere where resentment grows.

You know, the NIV translates it as keeping a record of wrongs. Love does not keep a record of wrongs. Now, imagine a relationship for a second.

[13:34] Imagine a relationship in which that is the practice. Keeping a record of wrongs is the practice. A marriage, perhaps, in which every new offense leads to a litany of all other wrongs you've ever done from time immemorial.

How will that kind of relationship operate in a healthy way? It can't. Imagine if each member of the body nurses his or her offenses or hurt until resentment continues to grow and gives way to bitterness in the body.

And everyone is parading their victimhood around as a badge of honor. How does that, how does a body like that function in a healthy way? It cannot.

Brothers and sisters, I hope it's clear to us all that Paul is not just riding a fluffy horse to love in this chapter. Instead, he is attempting to confront the Corinthians and us as well, I think, with each carefully chosen characteristic of love to show them how far they've missed the mark.

It's not by accident that Paul is choosing to use these characteristics of love. Because it shows clearly how far gone the church in Corinth is from the standard of love.

[15:20] And Paul continues in verse 6. He says to them, Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Now, to rejoice is to take pleasure in something.

And Paul, remember, Paul had rebuked them in chapter 5 for the acceptance of the incestuous man among them. This man committed a sin that even the pagans would have been scandalized by.

And he committed it among them. And they just accepted him. And so Paul says here, Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

To take pleasure here may mean being tolerant of open and unrepentant sin. sin. That could be one aspect of what it means to rejoice at wrongdoing.

It equally could also mean taking secret pleasure in the failure or fall of someone within the church. Ah, man, yes.

[16:33] That person thinks he's got it all together. That was a great fall. And within the body there's this pleasure in the fall or the failure or the stumbling of a brother or sister.

That's also rejoicing at wrongdoing. And love does not do that. Both are wrong. Both behavior show a lack of love.

Rather, love does what? Love rejoices in and with the truth. Now, mind you, that's not the same as enjoying the opportunity.

Rejoicing in the truth is not the same as enjoying the opportunity to say at every single instance, I told you so. That's not what rejoicing in the truth means. Rather, genuine love takes no personal pleasure in confronting a brother or sister with the truth.

But love will do so with a heavy but gracious heart. Love confronts someone with the truth in humility and gentleness.

[17:48] Love delights in the truth because it is the truth. Not to seek self-promotion or position at the expense of another.

And now, Paul brings the character sketch of love to its culmination in verse 7. And he says to us, love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Of course, Paul is not saying what our culture says regarding love here. He's not saying that love accepts everything. We already saw that love delights in the truth, right?

Love will not believe in a lie nor accept a lie. Neither does love rejoice in wrongdoing. you've already seen that. Rather, I love this translation of verse 7 by the Reverend Dr.

Tisselton. He paraphrased verse 7, he says it this way, love never tires of support. Love never loses faith.

[18:56] Love never exhausts hope. Love never gives up. Love never tires of support.

Bears all things. Never loses faith. Believe all things. Never exhausts hope. Hopes all things. Love never gives up. Endures all things. As I look at these sketches by Apostle Paul of the characteristics of love, I have to confess before you that I stand guilty of not measuring up to this standard.

And I imagine we are all in the same boat for honors with ourselves. Love convicts us all. And I hope that you see that love is more than just an emotion here.

That we can manufacture for a moment. rather the description of love here is a steadfast action. A commitment of not just emotions but of the will.

[20:14] A steadfast action that stems from the never ending, never giving up love of God in Christ Jesus. That's the love in description here.

In Christ we see the fullness of this love as sketched out by Apostle Paul. The love that left his glory out of great concern for us.

The selfless love of Christ that swooped down and lifted us up out of death and darkness into his life so that we may bask in the light of his love for eternity.

Paul shows us, Paul wants to show us that we fall short of this love and in showing us he doesn't mean to send us into a panic.

Rather he wants to humble us and to send us to our knees in confession. This is the way of love.

And we brothers and sisters, we need Jesus who lived this life perfectly.

[21:21] We need him. and on the basis of his unblemished life by which we've been justified, we need that to continue to perfect us through his Holy Spirit whom he's given to us.

So the way of love is just that, as Paul describes it. It is a way. if you've come to faith in Jesus Christ, trusting yourself, body and soul to him, having been justified by the merit of Jesus Christ alone, and having been given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of that reality, then you are called to tread in that way of love.

God, you are called to follow the footprint of our Lord and his footsteps. And as you do so, you are not on your own in this.

Together, as his body, the church, we are called to follow him who is our head. And we are called to help one another as we graciously do so.

And we are not alone, even as we do that. We saw in our gospel reading here that God, our Lord himself, has sent us another helper, the Holy Spirit, as our advocate, who leads us, who helps us, who convicts us of sin, and helps us progressively to become more and more like Christ as he is sanctifying us and as we follow him on the way of love.

[23:10] And so you're not meant to just fall into a pitiful, hopeless pit of, well, I can't do this.

Rather, we're meant to go to our knees and call on Jesus Christ, who will look and empower us to walk this way of love.

Jonathan Edwards wrote a book, and as he summarizes verse 18 to 13 here, he describes heaven. which is our home. He describes heaven as a world of love. And that's the viewpoint.

This is the trajectory that Paul now gives us towards the end of this chapter, starting in verse 18.

We're invited to stay on the way of love because it is our bridge, as it were, it is our bridge home to the world of love.

love. It's the sure path to our eternal home. So Paul says in verse 8, love never ends.

[24:21] As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when the perfect comes, the partial, the imperfect, will pass away.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. It's striking, isn't it, that love is not only essential, but love is eternal.

And we may, like the Corinthians, think that our gifts are where it's at. But Paul wants to show us, and he's been showing us, that love is far more important than gifts.

As one writer puts it, love is the one form of Christian action which does not require and is not subject to transformation or absorption into another.

[25 : 31] higher and future form. Love is what will last, brothers and sisters. Love is the absolute, whereas gifts are temporary.

All these spiritual gifts that we have, they've been given by God, they will become obsolete in heaven. They will be.

They will have no use there in heaven. There will be no need for prophecy. in heaven. No preaching. I'll be out of a job.

Thankfully, I'm looking forward to it. There will be no teaching of the Bible. We have the perfect teacher before us. No tongues in heaven to express intimacy with God because we'll have perfect intimacy with God.

All of these gifts, all of them will fade and cease in heaven. But what remains?

[26 : 36] Love. Love remains because love is the currency of heaven. It is the basis of our relationship between us and God. When perfection becomes reality, the imperfect, Paul says, the temporary, Paul says, will fade away.

And just a minor aside here, many have used these verses to argue for a cessation of the gifts after the apostolic age.

I just want to say, whatever you think about the presence of gifts now in this present age, these verses are not to be used to argue one way or the other on that topic.

That's not what Paul's intention is here. He's not arguing for cessation of gifts. in these verses.

Rather, he's arguing for the supremacy of love over gifts. And the view that Paul has is that in heaven all will be made perfect.

Not a kind of mature church in this side of eternity. The point Paul is making here is the supremacy and eternality of love.

[27 : 53] love. That's the view that Paul has in mind. Love is supreme. Love is eternal. And so he says in verse 11, when I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. But now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know, we know in part.

Then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. My three-year-old son can get away with so many things because of his age, because of his immaturity, that my nine-year-old son cannot get away with.

And he thinks, the nine-year-old thinks it's sometimes unfair that that is the case. The older ones think it's unfair, but we, his mother and I, try to impress upon him how inappropriate, how even embarrassing it would be if we were to oblige him and let him get away with what a three-year-old gets away with.

And what is true of the disparity between a three-year-old and a nine-year-old is even more pronounced and true between a child and a full-grown adult.

[29 : 18] And so Paul's implication is this in these verses. Now, in this world, we are still like little children.

We are spiritually underage. In this world, we are still seen through dim mirrors. By the way, mirrors in Paul's day are not like the kind of mirror that we have now.

They don't have those kind of mirrors. They had polished brass. And actually, Corinth is one of the centers in which they produce these things. Polished brass. And the reflection that you see from a polished brass is just dim and faint.

And so that's what he has in mind when he says, now we see in the mirror dimly. It's like maybe when you look at your mirror in the bathroom after you've taken a bath and it's all misty and you can see a silhouette of yourself.

You know your image but you can't see it clearly. That's what Paul has in mind here. In this world we see in the mirror dimly. We are growing still into maturity but we will not be fully grown until we'll see our Lord face to face.

[30:36] When we know him fully as we've been fully known. That's part of the beauty of heaven. The intimacy we will enjoy in heaven with God and with one another as we grow fully finally face to face into maturity.

And so as Christians we are to live our present life in this world in light of eternity. We are to value love which will continue to be ours in heaven over gifts.

And that's why Paul hands in verse 13 by saying so now faith hope and love abide. These three but the greatest of these is love.

We walk by faith. On this side of eternity we walk by faith and not by sight. But that kind of faith when we get to heaven will fade away.

When we actually have full sight. When we see him face to face. That's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, 7. And yet now in this world we have hope.

[31:50] But our hope will fade away when what we hope for is firmly in view in heaven. But what remains out of these three?

Love remains unchanged, undimmed. if anything it will only shine brighter and purer. Beloved in Christ we've seen that love is essential.

Gifts without love is useless. And we've seen that love is self-giving, not self-seeking. And lastly we'll see now that love is what will last for all eternity.

if this is then true we are to live now in this world in light of our future reality.

We are to pursue love as Paul will continue to state in chapter 14. Pursue love prioritizing the gifts that will build up the church in love.

[33:00] That's what we're to do. And if you've read these verses as we've gone through them and you've been pricked as I have been let me close with these words of the hymn writer John Newton.

In his hymn I'll sweet the name of Jesus the fourth stanza he says this weak is the effort of our heart and cold our warmest thought but when we see thee as thou art will praise thee as we ought that's that's the comfort we have brothers and sisters this chapter is like a surgeon's knife dissecting us and laying bare our weakness weaknesses but the comfort is that we are still on the way and if we remain on the way of love our Lord will see us bring us home to his world of love our heavenly abode and what we see dimly now what we only stumble as children under age in weakness struggle to do what we do in faltering steps now we will be able to do as we will be perfected on that day and we behold our

Lord face to face and so pursue love is love for us and our love and response imperfect though it may be on this side of eternity will bring us home to the world of perfect and unending love let us pray Lord we do ask that you will help us here at Holy Trinity to grow to continue to grow in love in love for you and in love for one another Lord we confess that we are pricked and we are convicted in these verses by our weaknesses but of us not to give into despair but rather

Lord to come to you Lord Jesus Christ who is the horse or finisher of our faith to trust you to entrust ourselves fully to you as you continue to work in us in the power of the Holy Spirit to become more and more like you and help us Lord that we will continually in increasing measure be known by the world around us by our love for one another and by our love for you we pray this in Jesus name

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