

Love is.....

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Preacher: Jordan Hitchcock

[0 : 00] Thanks, Connie. What are your priorities?

What is most important to you? A very successful lawyer parked his brand-new Lexus in front of his office, ready to show it off to his colleagues. As he got out, a truck passed too close and tore off the door on the driver's side.

The lawyer immediately grabbed his mobile phone, dialed triple O, and within minutes a policeman pulled up. Before the officer had a chance to ask any questions, the lawyer started screaming hysterically.

His Lexus, which he had just picked up the day before, was now completely ruined, no matter what the body shop did to it. When the lawyer finally wound down from his ranting and raving, the officer shook his head in disgust and disbelief.

I can't believe how materialistic you lawyers are, the officer said. You are so focused on your possessions that you don't notice anything else. How can you say such a thing? asked the lawyer.

[1 : 09] The officer replied, Don't you know that your left arm is missing from the elbow down? It must have been torn off when the truck hit you. Oh no, screamed the lawyer.

My Rolex. What is most important to you?

What is most important to us? Is it money? Is it personal achievement? Is it Christian ministry? The church in Corinth was a congregation in which people were falling into the temptation of having false priorities.

Certain things were given the first place of importance, which, though good and necessary in their place, were of secondary importance overall. At the beginning of his letter, Paul praised the Corinthians, giving thanks to God for them, because they had not only been saved, they had also been given great gifts of knowledge and of speech, and even miraculous gifts as part of the privilege of belonging to the Christian church.

But Paul also had to address this issue of priorities. The Corinthians had this tendency to value knowledge and to value wisdom. This was partly due to their heritage as Greeks.

[2 : 37] We know that the Greeks produced great philosophers and thinkers and great speakers and debaters. The Corinthian Christians held these abilities in high esteem.

And as you might expect, they tended to carry these values into their church life as well. They started to put certain men up on a pedestal and boast about their preaching ability.

And they seemed to have been highly enamoured with the more miraculous gifts, such as speaking in tongues. They tended to look for opportunity to exercise that gift more than was needed.

Now, in chapter 12, Paul outlines his view of spiritual gifts. His main emphasis there is that gifts are given to serve the common good. All believers have some gift or other, and we don't possess them in order to exalt ourselves over others.

We possess them in order to build up the whole body of Christ. And interestingly, Paul, although he tells them that gifts have their place, and we're to use them rightly, that doesn't stop him from saying that we ought to strive for the greater gifts, such as prophecy.

[3 : 46] The main thing is that we have to remember to exercise them in the right way and with the right motivation. And yet, as great and effective as gifts are, there is something that is greater still.

Love. Which Paul now turns to in chapter 13. If I speak in tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

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.

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. Now we're very familiar with these verses, aren't we?

And the trouble with famous passages of scripture is that we can tend to lose their impact. But Paul is saying here that love, whatever love may be, and we'll find out more about that in verses 4 to 7, love is so important that if it is absent in our lives and in the exercise of our spiritual gifts, we are nothing.

[5 : 07] And note very carefully, he doesn't just say that our ministries will be hindered, that we'll be functioning at a suboptimal level if we don't have love. He says that not only our ministries, but we ourselves will be nothing if we do not have love.

And this is very important because so often, as was the case with the Corinthians, we have this tendency to base our personal significance on what we do and particularly our spiritual gifts as Christians.

And so, I might be somebody because I'm preaching a sermon or you might be somebody because you're a good evangelist. And Paul's seeking to correct that sort of an attitude by saying that if you don't have love, whatever gifts you may have, you in fact are insignificant.

You don't have the personal greatness that you're hoping to have or thought you had. Now take note as well how comprehensive this list of gifts and outward displays of righteousness are in the first three verses.

We have miraculous gifts such as tongues and prophecy. We have the intellectual part with the understanding of mysteries and knowledge. We have the element of faith by which we might understand not necessarily saving faith but perhaps the sort of faith that expects God to perform miracles and is able to wait upon him to do some extraordinary work.

[6 : 39] And finally, a very challenging one in verse 3, the element of personal sacrifice. It's easy to think that if someone makes a personal sacrifice, they simply must have love.

They must be the epitome of love. Certainly, those who give all their possessions to the poor must be genuine, mustn't they? And Christ demonstrated his love by a great act of sacrifice, didn't he? Isn't personal sacrifice of the very essence of love then? Surprisingly, Paul implies in verse 3 that such an act of sacrifice might actually be done completely without love.

Let's read that verse again. 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.

The value of a sacrifice all depends on the motivation. Christ's sacrifice for us was a display of love because it was motivated by love.

[7 : 47] But people sometimes make great personal sacrifices, even great acts of charity such as giving their wealth to the poor with a selfish motivation rather than a loving motivation.

They do it so that they may boast, not from love. And from God's point of view, such sacrifices gain nothing for the one who gives them.

So again, look over these verses and note how comprehensive the picture is. You and I might have all these gifts and we might do all of these things and yet be completely lost and without Christ if we do not have love.

So as we look at our lives as individuals and as a church, we have to ask ourselves this question. Can we sum up our lives as Christians and all of our activities without mentioning love?

Do our lives consist of admiring great preaching, building skills for ministry, leading or attending small groups, nutting out difficult theological questions, even expecting God to do great things, even great acts of self-sacrifice?

[8 : 57] And can we sum up our lives by referring to these things only? Would that be the complete picture? If so, then rest assured, we are dead.

We have a reputation of being alive, but we are in fact dead. Or as Paul puts it in this chapter, we are nothing and we gain nothing. And if you're tempted to think that I'm splitting hairs when I say this, that perhaps I'm putting too fine a point on it, then you only have to look at Revelation chapter 2 verses 1 to 5.

Here Christ himself speaks these words to the Ephesian church. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers.

You have tested those who claim to be apostles and are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned your first love. Remember then from where you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first.

[10:07] If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. the Ephesians had it all. Sound doctrine, knowledge, discernment, self-sacrifice and hard work.

But the trouble was that this was the complete picture for them. Christ sums up that church by referring to these virtues alone. And so they were almost dead, almost ready to lose their place as part of God's church, because the first priority, love, was missing.

Now for modern evangelicals, this really ought to be quite alarming. We're known for our concern about doctrine. We're known for our high view of scripture. We are known for ministry training, mission and evangelism, but are we known for love?

When you ask yourself, what is an evangelical Christian, what comes to mind? All of the above, probably, and more. But does love enter the equation at all?

And if so, what place of priority is it given? Is it the top priority? Does love motivate us and sustain us, or is it merely an afterthought?

[11:29] Is love merely an effective communication tool for the purpose of evangelism? Is love merely a garnish that we layer onto our preaching so that people will listen to us?

In short, is love our top priority, or are we using an occasional appearance of love to justify what is really our top priority? Spiritual gifts without love are useless.

People without love are nothing. Churches without love are dead. Nothing can make up for the absence love is the top priority, the most important outworking of the Christian faith.

If it is so easy to fall into the trap of forgetting love, then it's vital that we know what love is. We must be able to discern whether or not we possess it. love is patient, love is kind.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. love is not envious of the love. It is not irritable or resentful.

[12:51] It does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

You can look at other descriptions of love throughout the New Testament, and some are quite complex and theological. We need to understand those passages as well, but here Paul is disarmingly simple and clear.

I suspect he wanted to prevent the Corinthians from philosophizing, theologizing, and speculating about love, as was their habit. He wanted them to recognize love in action and to practice it, so he wrote very practically and simply.

We read these verses in their simplicity and wonder, why we have such trouble with love. Even a child can understand these words. Well, the reason we find love a challenge is because of sin.

Sin corrupts our whole being and makes the simplest matters of godliness most challenging, indeed impossible, without God's grace. And part of the way sin works is by warping our priorities.

[14:07] And when our priorities are wrong, the most straightforward elements of godliness become impossible. I remember reading a book by Martin Lloyd Jones in which he spoke of the conversion of a certain man who had lived a very wild and sinful life.

But while living in this very disorderly way, he had always kept his moustache meticulously trimmed. I don't know why I remember that but it was just a very funny picture and it was an absurd picture of a person who had their top priorities in life completely wrong but never failed to keep his moustache looking spick.

Or for another example, I got a reminder notice from the electricity company the other day. I had forgotten to pay the electricity bill. And when I went to look for it, I couldn't even find it.

Have you ever done this? How simple is it to pay a bill on time? It's really not that hard, does it? Sorry, is it? And yet it completely passed me by because my mind and my heart were elsewhere. I was busy with other things. I had other priorities. And so something as simple and as easy as paying a bill became impossible for me. Well, it's the same thing with love.

[15:27] It's a challenge to us for the same reason. When our hearts and minds are consumed with the pressures of life, school, work and ministry, it becomes impossible for us to be patient.

When we become consumed with the prevalence of corruption and unbelief in the church, and that becomes the controlling thing in our hearts, it becomes impossible to be kind.

When giftedness in preaching becomes the top priority in our church, we immediately become envious of those who can preach, or boastful of ourselves or our minister, and we manifest arrogance and rudeness.

I could go on through these verses, but the point is clear. If you read the whole of 1 Corinthians, you'll find that these gifted and intelligent Christians had been behaving in the opposite manner of what is described in these verses.

And what was the reason? It was simply that they had put other things as the top priority. And so this relatively simple and clear aspect, the most important aspect of the Christian life, love, had ended up on the back burner and in fact it ended up impossible for them to obey and to manifest.

[16:43] And so they had to be reminded by the Apostle Paul of what love is and how it behaves. And they had to be reminded in very simple terms.

It's the same with us. Now if you have your Bibles open, let's read verses 4 to 7 together out loud. Love is patient, love is kind.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful.

It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

If we wish to maintain these qualities, we need to give love the place of first priority. So we've seen that love is of supreme importance so that nothing is right if we don't possess it.

[17:50] We've gone on to a simple description of love and the way it behaves so that we know what we should be aiming for. And if I can just add a couple of words by way of exposition, when we look at verse 7, it says it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

There is obviously some qualification to that. Love does not put up with sin endlessly. Love does not believe all things in the sense of any wind of doctrine that happens to be flying about.

Love doesn't hope for all things in the sense that the world hopes for whatever gives it the most pleasure or temporal success. What it means is that love believes all things that are worthy of belief.

Love hopes for all things that are worth hoping for, that have been promised in the gospel of Jesus. Another important aspect is it says that love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love. I think we have a great deal of difficulty at that point. We live in a society in which it is just simply not acceptable to criticise anybody for anything whatsoever except for the fact that you're critical.

[19:13] So we have to accept all lifestyles, we have to accept all beliefs and if you say no you're wrong, I'm sorry, your religion is wrong, Allah is not God overall, it is the Lord Jesus Christ, you are said to be unloving, you are said to be a bigot.

Now that's a misunderstanding of love and in fact that is an abuse of love, that's the very thing we're being warned against here because the top priority therefore is not really love but it's just the idea of maintaining a freedom for everybody to live the way they want.

If love was the true priority we would be concerned about what the truth is as it says in verse 6 because we would want all people to come to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, we would want all people to live in a way that is pleasing to him so that they could experience the blessings of salvation for eternity.

So having looked at how love is described in those verses we move on to why love is important in verses 8 to 13.

Now there are several reasons that you'll find given in the New Testament as to why love is important but Paul focuses on the eternal nature of love here. Love never ends but as for prophecies they will come to an end.

[20:46] As for tongues they will cease. As for knowledge it will come to an end. For we know only in part and we prophesy only in part but when the complete comes the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child I spoke like a child I thought like a child I reason like a child. When I became an adult I put an end to childish ways.

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.

And now faith, hope and love abide these three. And the greatest of these is love. The essence of Paul's argument in these verses is that spiritual gifts have a use by date.

They are given for a purpose which is temporary. After that there will be no need for them. In the grand scheme of things spiritual gifts as necessary as they are belong to the church in its state of childhood.

[21 : 58] But the time will come when the church reaches full maturity. Christ will return and then we will put childish ways behind us. We will put preaching behind us.

We will put mission behind us. We will put evangelism behind us. We will put prophecy and tongues behind us. As a child grows out of its childish ways we will grow out of the need for spiritual gifts.

So in light of this where should our priorities be? What should we be focusing on as of first importance in the living of our lives as Christians? Quite simply love which is everlasting.

The best view of God afforded by preaching and prophecy and so on is but a dim view. But a time is coming when we will see God clearly face to face without the aid of these things.

So how should this fact shape our priorities now? What sort of people should we be? What should we be focusing on as of first importance? Well quite simply we ought to be pursuing the way of love.

[23 : 07] Of the virtues which abide, outlined in verse 13, love is the greatest. In conclusion, I want to also add that we must not go to extremes.

Protestants have had a tendency to go to extremes for 500 years. It's deeply imprinted in our psyche. The very term Protestant indicates that we are reactionary in some sense.

And when we're reacting against something, we tend to go to extremes and we shouldn't do that.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that we ought to neglect spiritual gifts or mission and evangelism or even miraculous gifts in their place.

The message I'm presenting is put clearly in chapter 12 verse 31. He says there, but strive for the greater gifts and I will show you a still more excellent way.

And he puts it again in chapter 14 verse 1. Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts and especially that you may prophesy. So, as he says, pursue gifts, especially the greater gifts, but strive for love is an even higher priority.

[24 : 24] Without love, gifts are noisy gongs which achieve nothing but to herald the judgment of God on his church. The right view is the following. Gifts are great, some gifts are greater, love is best and most excellent.

How do we pursue love? How do we increase our love for God and for each other? Well, first we must acknowledge the extent to which our priorities have been false and we need to come to a right judgment of ourselves and our churches.

We need to recognize what have been our top priorities and we need to be specific about it. And then we must make a resolution to make love the first priority over and above those other things.

The first aspect of this concerns our relationship to God. Have we understood the gospel? Are we truly saved? The gospel is that God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Do you believe this? If you do, you will recognize that Christ's mission to save us was motivated by the love of God. We are saved because of Jesus' death on the cross on our behalf and his death for us was motivated by God's love for us.

[25 : 52] This is the foundation. We must get this right first. So if you have not believed in Jesus Christ, you must do so first before going any further. For those of us who believe the gospel, we must continue to keep it at the center.

Let's not put spiritual gifts or Christian activities at the center, but put the love of God in Christ at the center. Be consumed with this rather than with other things and we will find that love for one another naturally flows out.

When we immerse ourselves in the knowledge of the gospel while also maintaining constant communion with God in prayer, we will experience more of what it means to be filled with the Spirit, the Spirit who pours God's love into our hearts.

Though there are many more things that could be said about cultivating love in the church, I would just add that we ought to pray for each other more. Are we impatient or unkind?

Are we consumed with envy and with jealousy? One important antidote is to devote ourselves to God and to each other in prayer. prayer cultivates love because prayer is one of the main ways in which we allow God's Spirit to have his way in our hearts and lives.

[27 : 13] Gifts are great, some gifts are greater. Love is best and most excellent. Pursue the way of love. Amen.