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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0:00] Today we are looking at that passage, 1 Corinthians 13, the love passage. I'm sure it's somewhat familiar. It's one of the most common passages read at weddings.

It was read at my wedding. Anybody else here haven't read at their wedding? Come on, come on. I see hands up. That's wonderful, that's wonderful. Now, surely it's because it's all about romantic love.

Romantic love between a man and a woman, isn't it? Shouldn't we just pluck this chapter right out of 1 Corinthians and just feel encouraged about love?

Maybe I should tell you to snuggle up to your husband or wife. Maybe if you're thinking about getting married, this is really the chapter you need to focus on. Don't think about the rest of 1 Corinthians.

This is all it's about. Is that what this chapter is all about? Now, in English, we use the word love to refer to all kinds of things.

[1:07] You know, I refer to things I have a great deal of affection for. I love pink iced donuts. They're delicious. You know, I use it for romantic interests.

I love my wife. She makes me feel great. You know, in English, this word has a lot of different meanings. But what is Paul talking about here?

What is this love he is talking about? Tonight, we're going to find out what this love is. Is it this romantic love or is it somehow different?

Over the last number of weeks, and this weekend in particular, we've been looking at 1 Corinthians. Paul has rebuked and corrected the understanding of the Corinthian people about a whole range of things.

He has corrected them about their division in the church. Their sexual sin. Their willingness to abuse their Christian freedom.

[2:10] How they would not look after their weaker brothers. And we've seen over this weekend things like how tongues and prophecy, how that fits into church.

But now, Paul gets to the climax of what he's been talking about. And he starts with that last verse of chapter 12. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

I've had to correct you about all these things. Now let me show you how you should be characterized. Paul speaks about love. And he's going to talk about it in three ways.

He's going to show its value, how it's characterized, and its expiry date. So please have a look at verse 1 with me of chapter 13.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. Even if Paul speaks in many languages, just like in Acts 2 at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they could speak many languages.

[3:19] If Paul could do this, and if he could speak in holy languages, but he doesn't have love, it's completely useless. It's just like the noise of a clanging cymbal.

Now this may be a reference to pagan worship, but it's likely that at least he's saying that tongues without love is just meaningless noise.

I had the opportunity to preach this morning at our Mandarin service. And a whole lot of that time I was thinking, man, I just wish I could speak Mandarin.

Wouldn't that be great? Come on, I've actually prayed in the past. Lord, give me the spiritual gift of tongues so I can speak Chinese. And don't have to do all the hard work learning it myself.

But if I was to do that, if I could actually speak Chinese, but didn't do it in love, it's just a waste. It's a complete waste. Paul continues in verse 2.

[4 : 21] 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 have not love, I am nothing.

These are the things that Paul has been talking to the Corinthians about. The Corinthians prided themselves on their knowledge, their ability to prophesy and understand mysteries.

But knowledge without love, it's like being hit with a blunt instrument. And I'm sure you've felt this before. Being battered by someone else's knowledge can be very painful.

Imagine with me for a minute. You've broken down on the side of the road. You've got a flat tire.

And you need to change it, but you don't know how. That might be the case for some of us here.

I'm not sure. But imagine, you're in that situation. I see some heads nodding. That's good. And all of a sudden, a car pulls over. And you're thinking, great, this person's going to help me. This is going to be really good. And they get out.

[5 : 22] And he says, ah, I see you've got a flat tire. And you think, thank you, Captain Obvious. He asks, do you know how to change it?

And you're forced to say, no. I don't know how to. So while he's changing the tire for you, he starts telling you how many tires he's changed in the past.

How his father taught him how to change tires before he was even out of short pants. And he just goes on and on. And you're thinking, you know, why don't you just hit me with the tire iron and be done with it?

You know, you're just showing off about how easy it is to change this tire. Great. You're just beating me in the head with your knowledge.

What would you think? Great. Thanks for your help. But why did you have to show off? Why did you have to beat me with that knowledge? Paul says that if there is no love, your knowledge is nothing.

[6 : 24] If you don't use your knowledge the right way, it's all for nothing. Your degrees from university, everything you've learned is just a complete waste.

Even if I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Paul goes to the extreme. Even if I give everything away in this great show of philanthropy and set my body on fire, but don't do it with love, it's a waste.

In this divine mathematics, five minus one equals zero. You're spiritually bankrupt unless love characterizes the gifts that God has given you.

What would Paul say to us if he was talking to us today? He would probably question those who think they are so spiritual because of the knowledge of the Bible that they have.

[7 : 31] Maybe they're not as deliberate as the guy with the tire, but every time when you're in Bible study, you know, they're the first person to answer. You know, they answer every question. What about those of us who think one style of worshiping God, that is the best?

You know, whether it's the type of worship, the instruments used, whatever it is. If worship isn't expressed in love, then that worship of God is nothing.

Love is of the greatest value. It is more important than having all the spiritual gifts, all tongues, all knowledge, all prophecy, as we've seen over this weekend.

These are great things to have. But if you don't use them and show them with love, they're a waste. Our actions show that we are spiritually bankrupt.

So love, it's really important. It's of greatest value. But what is it? What is this love? Have a look at verse 4 with me as Paul switches between what it is and what it's not.

[8 : 40] Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It is not rude. It is not self-seeking.

It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

This love is amazing. It's ideal. It's absolutely impossible. You can see why people want this part of the Bible read at their weddings.

You know, if this is what our love was like, we wouldn't have relationship breakdowns. We wouldn't have brothers fighting sisters.

We wouldn't have parents fighting children. We wouldn't have husbands and wives breaking up if our love was like this. But our love is not like this at all.

[9 : 40] My love is not like this. My love is self-serving. We say things like, I don't feel loved. I've fallen out of love.

I just don't love you anymore. When we say this, we really mean romantic love. But the love Paul describes, it's radically different.

It is a self-sacrificial love. It is totally other person-centered. It is the love that says, I love you, even though you are not lovely yourself.

This love is patient. This word doesn't mean just waiting a long time, but enduring injury without retaliation.

This love is kind. Not just patient in the face of injury, but quick to pay back with kindness. And Paul sums it up best when he says that this love is not self-seeking.

[10:43] This love doesn't seek satisfaction for itself, but is prepared to give up what it has for others. There are a number of Greek words for love, but Christians redefine this word, agape, to mean self-sacrificial love.

Say this word with me, agape. Ready? One, two, three. Agape. There you go. You know some Greek. About as much as I do. Agape love, this love is not our love.

We do not show this kind of love naturally. Naturally, we seek our best interests. We will only love those who are lovely. I'll be kind if it will benefit me.

We're self-seeking. But this agape love, it's not a romantic love. It is not affectionate love. It is the self-sacrificial love that characterizes God through the Bible.

When a young man reveals his passion to a young woman and he says, I love you. He's saying at least on some level, I find delight in you.

[11:57] You please me. I love you because you are lovely. This love is self-seeking, at least on some level. But God's love is self-originating.

It comes from himself. That great verse, John 3, 16. For God so loved the world, he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

God loves the world, not because it is lovely. You know, it's not that the world is so lovely, God can't help himself from loving it and sending his son to die for it.

It's the complete opposite. We are unlovely. If God's love was anything like ours, he wouldn't have sent his son to die.

But because God loves sacrificially, he did. Jesus died to save us and we do not deserve this love.

[13:02] We are not worth dying for. We have done nothing that God should sit up and love us.

We have turned away and rejected him.

This love that God shows is a sacrificial love. And we don't show this naturally. But God does. It is part of his character.

And because we have been saved by God's love, this is how our actions are to be characterized.

So Paul can say in chapter 16 of 1 Corinthians, do everything in love.

He doesn't say that for selfish gain, but for the gain of others. Jesus says the same thing in John 13.

All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

It is this quality, this agape love, that sets what Christians do apart from the rest of the world. This agape love is the climax of how we are to operate as God's people in God's kingdom.

[14:11] That's why it won't end. It's part of God's kingdom now and forever. Have a look at verse 8 with me. 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. For we know in part and we prophesy in part.

But when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. This agape love is permanent. When God decides to send his son to, you know, wrap things up on that final day of judgment.

To call us, his people, home. After that time, there will be no more prophecies. They will be fulfilled.

The imperfect partial knowledge that we have of God will be filled and finished.

But love carries on. It endures past judgment. We will be with the Lord Jesus as he reigns.

[15:18] As he reigns and loves us and we love him. This chapter is not just about how I should love my wife. It's not about what marriage should look like.

It shows us how we should act in all aspects of life. Love is more valuable than prophecies and knowledge. They will end. But love continues.

I think you get a glimpse of this sacrificial love when you have children. When Isaac was born, it forced me to be something other than selfish.

To a certain degree. Just to a small amount. I would prefer to do nearly anything than change a dirty nappy. I would prefer to do nearly anything than rock a crying child to sleep at 2 o'clock in the

morning when I have had very little sleep myself.

You know, when you're covered in vomit and everything smells. It's just awful. But have kids. They're great. You know, you're tired. You don't want to do it. Sometimes I really don't want him interrupting my life.

[16:31] Sometimes I still don't, to be honest. But when he was little, if we didn't feed him, he didn't get fed. Even now, he's two and a half years old.

He can't fend for himself. If Alyssa and I ignored him completely for just one day, just one day, he would be probably cold, very hungry, probably hurt because he likes to climb things these days. Kids force you to not be selfish. You have to sacrifice your time for them. I do these things because I love him.

But also because I have to. Otherwise, he would not live. Do I begrudge him when I have to look after him? In my weaker moments, I do.

But God's love is greater than ours. It is true agape love. Truly other person-centered. He picks us up when we are like a kicking and screaming child.

[17:45] He cleans off the mess in our lives. He forgives our sins. And he doesn't do it begrudgingly like I do. But God chooses to love us.

God has shown us what his love is like. And he invites us to love like him. Two things in particular happen when we display this agape love.

The first is that people notice. And the second is that relationships are mended. People notice. If you've ever showed this agape love, this other person-centered love, people notice.

They say, you're strange. You're so nice. Have you ever had this? I see some people nodding.

That's good. I've been reading the Bible recently with a guy called Jason.

He's Chinese. Awesome guy. I love reading the Bible with him. But on the first week, he asked me a couple of great questions. In particular, he asked why I was studying at Moore College.

[18:51] Why? You've already studied. You were working. You had a good job. You were earning good money. Why did you become a full-time student again, not earn much money at all, to be a minister?

It's a great question. I've asked myself that question a number of times. But I told him it's because I loved studying the Word and I love teaching people about God.

And he asked me a second question. Why do I read the Bible with him? I read the Bible with him late on a Sunday night, after church. I've spent all day at church.

I'm tired. I've got dinner waiting for me at home. I'm hungry. I would like to be somewhere else, but I'm there with him, reading the Bible.

Why? He's noticed that there's something different. Imagine if we showed this kind of love every day.

[20:02] Whether it's at work, studying, talking to the person at the checkout counter when you're getting food. In your marriage, people take notice and they want to know why you love.

The second thing that happens when we show this agape love is that relationships are mended.

Through God's love, through his son, our relationship with God has been restored.

And our relationships with each other's can be healed. Relationships that were broken can be mended. Men and women, husbands and wives, divisions in the church, brothers and sisters, parents and their children.

Through this love that seeks to put other people's needs ahead of your own, there can be restoration of these relationships.

Why would you not want to love like this? I'm not going to sugarcoat it. It's really hard work.

[21:12] If you've ever had a conversation with someone and they disagreed with you, you know how hard it is to love them more than yourself.

But it is this love that has brought us life. It is a divine attribute. It was never going to be easy. But through this love, we get to show others the love of God.

Through this love, relationships can be restored. How can we not want to have this kind of love?

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you that you love us even though we are not lovely. Father, help us to see with your eyes, to love like you do.

To love others more than we love ourselves. In your son's name we pray. Amen.