

Authentic Love

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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Prayer

Happy Valentine's Day! What better day to focus on Christian love? We get so ambiguous about love. There is the love of ice cream. I could tell you how much I love steak. We could talk about physical attraction or how much we love to read. But none of these things are remotely related to authentic love that Paul is talking about in this chapter in 1 Corinthians. I for one previously have overlooked some of the painful truths in this chapter and read it as a beautiful description of God's love. But a deeper understanding leaves us chastised and inadequate in the authentic love department. Paul is sending the Church at Corinth a wake-up call, and by extension, he is sending the same message to the Church at East Cobb. Let's take a closer look.

Special, Gifted, But Have Not Love? (v. 1-3)

The words are so familiar that they roll off our tongues. *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol."* Do you hear what Paul is really saying? Paul takes the most impressive and gifted that he can imagine and says that if we have all these gifts and use them without love, it is all for nothing. Worse than that, it is just harsh noise that really does nothing to help people experience God's love. The Church at Corinth was like that. They savored their gifts and the speaking in tongues, but they were not a loving people. Instead, they were self-focused, proud, but empty – no love. Are we like that? Am I like that? All noise and no love?

Then Paul says, *"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."* We've all seen that pastor that with just a commanding presence, who speaks with authority, rattling off the Greek, the Hebrew, and maybe even a bit of Aramaic. They can quote Homer the poet and Homer Simpson, and we are impressed. But Paul says none of that matters if we do have love.

My grandmother's brother was a Methodist pastor. He was ordained a Deacon in 1915, the year my father was born, and received his Elder's orders in 1917. I did not hear him speak many times, but I was always impressed with his command of the pulpit and his knowledge of scripture. He was distinguished, sophisticated, and served the church with distinction for many years. He married my parents 65 years ago last week while he was serving as District Superintendent of the Elizabeth City District in the North Carolina Conference. But the pastor who meant the most to me in my life was one who read every word of a poorly prepared sermon each week. The church grew under his leadership because he genuinely loved us, and we knew it. Uncle Herbert had the gifts and the love, but Rev. C. P. Pearce had only the love, and that was more than enough. Without love, Paul says, we are nothing. With love, we have all we need.

Unfortunately for us, Paul's admonition squares with Jesus' words in Matthew 7:22 where Jesus says, *"Many will say to me on that day 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell the plainly 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.'"*

You had my gifts – everyone does. But you did not have the essence of who I am. You did not have my love.

In verse 3, Paul says, *“If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”* If you give everything – even your life – and your motive is not love, then it all for nothing.

What Love Is and Is Not?

If love is so important, then what is it? Based on what we’ve said so far, maybe we have it all wrong. Beginning in verse 4, Paul tells us what love is. *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”* Paul says love is patient and kind. That’s a potent combination. Some of us can do grim-faced patience... but it’s not kind. Some of us can do superficial sweetness, but it’s short-lived. Can you do patience and kindness? Together? Patience is such a key element to love, Paul begins and ends his list with it. In verse 4, he says, *‘Love is patient.’* At the end of verse 7 he says, *“[Love] always perseveres.”* Then in verse 8 he says *“Love never fails.”* Love puts up with constant frustration, constant interruption, constant set-back, constant opposition, but in the midst of all that love never fails.

Also in verse 4 Paul tells us what love is not. And of course everything that love is not, the Corinthians are. Paul deliberately writes this by reversing all the things the Corinthians are. He knows they are boastful, rude, etc. And so are we. We manage to be both envious and boastful. Feelings of inferiority and superiority simultaneously? Are you able to think: “I’m better than everyone” and at the same time think “It’s not fair, I wish I was like them.” That’s what the Corinthians were like. That’s what we are like. And it is the polar opposite of love. Love is so consumed with the other person that it is just not interested in inferiority or superiority. You don’t think more of yourself or less of yourself. You just think of yourself less. When love is flourishing, boasting and envy are just non-issues. But boasting and envy are huge issues for us, so what does that say about us?

Then in verse 5, Paul goes on: *“It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.”* We all think we’re easy-going until we’re wronged. Then we see just how self-seeking we are. We snap, we’re rude, we get angry, and we keep score. That’s what we’re like. What would it be like to never be rude, never self-seeking, not easily angered, to never keep a record of wrong or bear a grudge. That’s what love is.

Verse 6 says, *“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”* Do you ever wish evil on your opponents? Do you ever wish you could bend or hide or side-line the truth because it’s inconvenient? Love never does that. Verses 7 and 8 finish this portion of the chapter: *“Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”* (Emphasis added).

Are you a loving person? Let’s all read aloud verses 4-7 and instead of the word love, let’s replace it with ‘I’. Let’s try it: *“I am patient, I am kind. I do not envy, I do not boast, I am not proud. I am not rude, I do not insist on my own way, I am not easily angered, I do not resent others, I keep no record of wrongs. I do not delight in evil but I rejoice in the truth. I always protect, I always trust, I always hope, I always persevere.”*

Now that we’ve all perjured ourselves, do you see why this is such a challenging passage? Love is this. I’m not this. You are not this. And Paul says ‘Unless you *have* love you’re nothing.’

There is Hope

Paul gives us two rays of hope that will help us live out 1 Corinthians 13. Hope for the present and hope for the future.

The night before Jesus died, he got up from the evening meal, took off his robe, put on a towel, got down on his hands and knees and the Lord of Heaven washed the filthy feet of the men who would desert him and of Judas who would betray him to death. Knowing his imminent death, he spent time patiently teaching and comforting them. He took his three closest friends to Gethsemane and there, while they let him down yet again, Jesus agonized in prayer. Jesus said, “*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death*”. The bible said he was sweating blood. The cross was, for Jesus, a torrent of judgement, full of the righteous anger of God against sin. All our unlovingness and unloveliness must be consumed in the holy love of God. And so the dilemma was this – either Jesus takes the punishment for sin, or we have to. Either he is consumed for our unloveliness, or we are. Either he dies the death of the godforsaken, or we do. And in that garden Jesus said, ‘Let it be me.’

We asked the question earlier: What is love? Perhaps a better question is: Who is love? Love is a person - a person who first has loved you. 1 John 4:19 sums up an absolutely fundamental bible truth: “*We love because He first loved us*”. You are on the receiving end of this love. Love is first something done to you. And then love is something done in you and through you. That is why verses 1-3 talk about having love or not having love. It's one or the other. Do you have love or don't you? That's the big question for Paul. It's not: How loving are you on a scale of 1-10? Paul's interest, the bible's interest, God's interest is in one thing: Do you *have* love? There is a person called love. His name is Jesus, and he loves you. Do you have love? Well do you?

Maybe you're thinking ‘I do have Jesus in my life, but still my love is very patchy to say the least.’ Well that's why we need the last paragraph. It's not just about a person of love. It's about a future of love. Paul tells us in verses 8-13 that none of us have arrived yet. We are all waiting for maturity. We are all waiting for perfect love. Hear those words again:

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, ^obut when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 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 childish ways behind me. Now we see in a mirror dimly; but then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three abide: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

(1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

Paul wanted the Corinthian Church and us to understand how our present experience compares to the future. Love bubbles out of us one minute, sin the next. It's so patchy and mixed up. So Paul comforts us and says – one day everything will change. In verses 8 and 9, all these gifts (that we think are so important) will completely cease. Even the most dazzling and impressive gift now, will be utterly obsolete when this future comes to pass.

What is this future? Paul describes it in three ways in verses 10, 11 and 12. Verse 10 calls it ‘completion’ or ‘perfection.’ It's the idea of everything brought to the goal for which it was designed. Right now all things are subjected to frustration. But then – your body will work the way it was meant to work, relationships will work the way they're meant to

work, the world will work the way it's meant to work. Perfection. Completion. You are built for it. It is coming.

Verse 11 describes maturity in our future. Paul says, we are like kids now. Even the wisest and most knowledgeable among us are like toddlers running around compared to our wisdom and maturity then. But really, one day you and I will grow up in every dimension. And then in verse 12 we find the very heart of our future: 'Face to face'. Face to face with Jesus.

The life to come is a world of love. We have seen the future: the future is love. Well friends, why don't we live it now? Go from being a person who has not love, to a person who has the love of God. He loves you, He will live his life of love in you and through you. An unbelievable future is yours for the asking. Be willing to take another look at yourself as you prepare to come to this table today. Holy Communion is a means of grace – a symbolic meal - pointing us to the Jesus Christ, the personification of love. His body was given for you. His blood was shed for you in love. Be nourished by this, Then just stop trying to outshine everyone with your gifts; stop being the cool one; stop trying to be the clever one, the knowledgeable one, the funny one, the pretty one, the fun one, the gifted one; just love. Love is what lasts, love is what counts.

Prayer

Sacrament of Holy Communion

The hymn writer, Frederick M. Lehman, wrote this song in 1917 in Pasadena, California, and it was published in *Songs That Are Different*, Volume 2, 1919.

The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star,
And reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled,
And pardoned from his sin.

Refrain

*O love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure
The saints' and angels' song.*

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.

Refrain