

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series called The Gospel Changes Everything, based on the New Testament book 1 Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, a church he started around the year 50 AD. He has since left the church in the hands of other leaders so that he might start other churches, and he writes this letter around the year 54-55 AD in response to what he is hearing about some of the issues in the Corinthian church. So far he's addressed the pride and arrogance in the church that has led to division and rivalry, the sexual issues that are rampant in the church and culture, how they should interact with the idols and false gods in the city, and some of the problems happening in their worship gatherings. In this section, from chapters 12-14, he is addressing something he calls "spiritual gifts" – supernatural abilities that believers receive when God puts His Holy Spirit in them at salvation.

Remember that Paul is writing this letter in response to the issues going on in the Corinthian church, and one of the issues they were dealing with is that they had elevated certain gifts and abilities above others as the mark of real spirituality. Specifically, those who could speak in tongues, in other-worldly language, were seen as superior, as more spiritual than everyone else. And so Paul is addressing the idea of spiritual gifts and whether or not there really are different classes of spirituality in the Lord. In chapter 12, he talked about how God gives spiritual gifts to every believer, that every gift is important, and that all the gifts are to be used to build up the church and serve others. He ended chapter 12 by saying "*But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.*" (1 Cor 12:31).

In other words, as important as spiritual gifts are, there is something more important than gifts, more important than speaking in tongues or prophesying or preaching or anything else – love. Four things we need to know about love:

*1 Corinthians 13:1-3 - 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

### 1) Without love, our gifts and actions mean nothing

Remember that Paul is not just sharing a poem he wrote on love here. He is correcting the Corinthians' false understanding and application of spiritual gifts and what makes someone spiritually greater than another person. Notice first of all

that Paul speaks in first person to soften the blow, which is a very pastoral thing to do. As Paul will mention in chapter 14, he speaks in tongues more than any of them, and can prophesy, and preach, and has suffered more than any of them. But he tells them that those abilities and experiences mean nothing if they are not done without the most important element: love. What does this mean for us?

*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.*

Don't mistake talent for character. You can have the most supernatural gifts and abilities, speaking in the tongues of men and angels, but without love, it's just noise. You may listen to a preacher or a worship leader and be blown away by their abilities, but someone who really knows them might tell you what an arrogant jerk they are. The reality is that you can be a gifted preacher or musician or leader or evangelist, but you can be a failure when it comes to love.

*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.*

Don't mistake knowledge or faith for love. You can know everything and be able to speak God's words, and have a strong faith, but without love, it's nothing, worthless. You can be a wise theologian or inspiring Christian, but still not be a person who really loves others.

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

Don't mistake a passion for justice for love. You can give sacrificially and be willing to die for your faith, but without love, you gain nothing. You can be a social justice warrior or be willing to die for what you believe but still not have a heart filled with love. And if that is the case, Paul says, your actions do not amount to anything before God.

What else might we add to this? How many who have achieved financial or career success and lost their families or the love of others in the process have thought it was worth it? Your financial or career success means nothing without love. There is something about love that is at the core of what we need as a human.

So Paul begins by letting them know that at the heart of the matter, it's not about the gifts, or the knowledge, or justice, or sacrifice. It's about love. **The greater gifts**

are not the ones that are the flashiest or seem the most supernatural; the greater gifts are the ones that build up others in love. Love is at the heart of it all, and if you exercise your gifts without love, it means nothing.

**So what is love?** In the next four verses, Paul goes on to tell them what love is:

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>8</sup> Love never fails.*

If you have ever been to a wedding, you have likely heard that passage read. But Paul is not writing this as a poem, as an ode to love. He is giving the Corinthians a necessary correction to their competition and division over who is more spiritual. The words he uses here are verbs, not adjectives – love is an action: being patient and kind, not envying or boasting, not filled with pride. Love is not rude or self-seeking, not easily angered, and it doesn't keep a record of wrongs. It doesn't delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres, and never fails. And more importantly, every quality he lays out here goes against something he has accused the Corinthians of doing in the first 12 chapters. They have been impatient, unkind, envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, keeping record of wrongs, delighting in evil. They have many gifts, and many talents, and a lot of knowledge, but love is in short supply.

But look even closer at this list. It sounds poetic, no doubt, but by the end of it, who can measure up? Maybe the bride and groom in their blissful ignorance, standing there and looking at each other looking their best, believe that their love will always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere, and never fail. But who else among us has experienced love like this?

Some of you hear this list and look at yourself critically. All you hear is condemnation – I need to be more patient with my kids... I need to be kinder to my spouse... I have to stop holding a record of wrongs against my parents... I need to be less self-seeking in how I relate to others. Some of you know that this call to love is a higher bar than you can ever clear. Others of you hear this list and mourn the fact that you have never experienced love from anyone else that has come close to this. Your parents failed you. Lovers have failed you. Friends have failed you. Nobody has ever loved you in the way your heart longs to be loved. Who in your life can you look at and say – he or she always protects, always trusts, always

hopes, always perseveres, and never fails? Nor your parents, not your spouse, not your friends, and not your pastor. This is because:

## 2) Perfect love is beyond our ability to achieve

Who among us is always patient, and kind, never envious, never boastful, never proud, never rude, always seeking the good of others, never easily angered, never keeping record of wrongs? This love thing may sound beautiful and basic, but in reality, it's so far above our abilities.

**So what are we to do?** Work on patience on Monday, kindness on Tuesday, and so on?

Or is there a better way? Is there a way that our hearts can be transformed so that we become more loving across the board? Thankfully, there is.

## 3) God is love, and loves us perfectly

You see, there is one who loves perfectly, whose love has the power to transform our hearts.

**1 John 4:7-10** - *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because **God is love.** <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> **This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.***

That is love – not that we loved, but that God loved us and sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross in our place, for our sins, to bring us back into a right relationship with Him.

**Romans 5:6-10** - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup> Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! <sup>10</sup> For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

That is love! This is the love that is patient, as God was patient with us, giving us time to repent. This is the love that is kind, as he draws us to Him by His love and kindness. This is the love that is not self-seeking, as Jesus sought our good above His own, laying down His life so that we might be saved. This is the love that keeps no record of wrongs. This is the love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. This is the love that never fails that our hearts have longed for.

How will we ever be able to love in a way that measures up to 1 Corinthians 13? Only because He loved us first.

*<sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. <sup>13</sup> We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup> If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. <sup>16</sup> And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. **God is love.** Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. <sup>17</sup> In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. <sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. <sup>19</sup> **We love because he first loved us.** <sup>20</sup> If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

If we are going to live with a 1 Corinthians 13 kind of love, **I think that we need to be able to enter the world not from a place of neediness but from a place of security.** If we don't know that we are loved and worthy of love, then we will go out to the world in a self-centered way, searching for others to meet our deep need for love and value. We will be impatient, easily angered, and unkind to others because they fail to be who we need them to be. We will distrust and keep a record of wrongs in our head, because we are wounded and can not afford to be hurt again. We will boast, looking for others to tell us that we are valuable and lovable. Until we know that we are loved and valuable, we will continually enter relationships from a place of neediness, looking to others to affirm and applaud and meet our need for love.

But in Jesus, that love and approval is found. We know that we are worth so much that God sent His Son to die in our place, to rescue us and bring us back into a right relationship with Him. **In the gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we find the love that frees us from our neediness.** He loved us when we were at our worst. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And so we can love others, even when they are at their worst, for we have learned that this is what love does.

<sup>7</sup> *It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* <sup>8</sup> *Love never fails.*

Love forgives. We can love with hope and endurance, knowing that there are no hopeless cases. Instead of trying to work on a different characteristic of love every day of the week, we can simply more fully understand and embrace the love of God as displayed in Christ Jesus, and our hearts will be more and more transformed.

He continues:

*But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. <sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

#### 4) We will experience perfect love for eternity

Remember again, he is correcting their false view of spiritual gifts. He tells them that even the most supernatural of gifts are not eternal. There will be no need for prophecy or tongues or supernatural knowledge in heaven, because we will be with God. In the light of eternity, everything else will fade away. We won't need preachers to tell us about God, or prophets to declare His mysteries, or people to express praise in tongues. Even faith and hope will no longer be necessary – we won't need to have faith or hope in God when we are finally with him. In the end, the fabric of heaven will be love. And that just feels right. **People want eternal life, but it's not really eternal life they want but eternal love.** It's not about endless

rounds of golf or an eternal vacation. We want to know that love lasts beyond the grave.

And because of Jesus, it will. Now we see like a mirror, like a photograph, but on that day we will see face to face. Now we only have partial knowledge, but then we will know fully and be fully known. When we are finally with Him, we will enjoy the perfect love our hearts have been searching for, for all eternity.

As Jonathan Edwards put it:

*“God is the highest good of the reasonable creature, and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows. But the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.”*

And in the words of JI Packer:

*JI Packer – “Hearts on earth may say in the course of a joyful experience, “I don’t want this ever to end.” But invariably it does. The hearts of those in heaven say, “I want this to go on forever.” And it will. There is no better news than this*

We love because He loved us. We can love selflessly because He is loving us, and because we will have Him, and along with Him perfect love, forever. Let His perfect love free you from your neediness and transform you into a person who has the power to love others as He has loved you.