

## Unified in Love

### 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Sermon:

Last week Pastor Erik led us through the first part of Colossians chapter 3...and I want to re-read for you verses 1 and 2: *<sup>1</sup>So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.*

Are you working on your lists? If you don't know what I'm talking about, you might want to hop onto our website and listen to Erik's message again. Did you call or text someone to help you work through doing that; setting your mind on heavenly things?

Pastor Erik pointed out that our attraction to earthly things often gets in the way of our seeking after the things of God. I love the thought he dropped on us: how often do worries about things that have no importance in light of eternity, or the toys and trinkets that that more often than not end up in a garage sale, consume our thinking?

We can't let that happen. Our focus should be on Christ as we run this race toward eternity. And that...is a race every one of us in this world is running. Every human that draws breath on the face of the planet is running toward the finish line of eternity.

As he wrapped up last week, Pastor Erik transitioned from the things that we need to put to death and put away - there's that big list in Colossians 3:5-8 - to the things we need to put on: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Verse 14: *Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.*

So my challenge this week, if we are to put on love, is to define love. Piece of cake, right? Unfortunately, no. Oxford dictionary defines "love" 4 ways:

1. An intense feeling of deep affection - "babies fill parents with feelings of love" or a strong romantic or sexual attachment to someone.

2. A great interest or pleasure in something - “his love for football”
3. A person or thing that one loves - “she was the love of his life”
4. In tennis, squash and some other sports, a score of zero.

These are all descriptions, most of them (except for that tennis thing) centered around some kind of feeling. So, can love be defined, or only described? Sally and I were driving back from Willow earlier this week and the sunlight was banging off all the trees that were in full-on fall mode along the Parks highway.

Over and over she picked up her phone to take a picture of them and each time she was disappointed with the result. Then she grabbed my phone, since everyone knows the Samsung cameras make the iPhone cameras look like a child’s toy, but still frustrated, she said “it just doesn’t do it justice!”

And such is love. For me to try to define it for you is kind of like me trying to define my wife’s face. I can describe for you; the slope of her nose, the rise of her cheekbones, the light in her eyes, but I can’t put it all together in a way that makes the description understandable to someone that doesn’t know her like I do after 27 years. And I’m still learning.

The sum total of all those descriptions won’t capture the subtle nuances; how the slightest of variations in her face convey irritation, or joy, pain, contentment, or, my personal favorite: “Oh, you stupid, stupid man.” when I’ve missed something. Which happens a lot. See, the description just doesn’t do it justice. The description can never compare to the experience of knowing her.

Especially when I haven’t found some way to make her mad at me. I can’t accurately describe that experience either.

So where do you think I might go for help? Tell you what, get your Bibles out, electronic or otherwise, and flip over to 1 Corinthians chapter 13. Some of you are probably already there, aren’t you? And why not? It’s the “love chapter” isn’t it?

Once again, I'm reading from the Christian Standard Bible, so your version or translation may read a little differently, especially if you're in the King James, which translates the Greek to the word "charity". Again, here, even what this chapter gives us is a description, or a display of love, not a real definition. And these verses can be broken down, kind of mechanically, I guess, into 3 aspects: the value of love, the character of love and the permanence of love.

Let's begin with verse 1, then: *<sup>1</sup>If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

As we saw in the Oxford Dictionary, we can use our English word "love" in a lot of different ways, and the proper meaning for any one of them relies heavily on the context in which we use the word. No wonder our language is confusing! The Greeks, however, had several different words for love, each describing a certain type of love, for lack of a better term.

The two that we find in the New Testament are *phileo* and *agape*. *Phileo* describes the type of love you would see displayed among close friends or family members. *Agape* is what we find in our passage, and it references the highest form of love; divine love. This isn't the rush of emotion and feelings that we get when we "fall in love". It is, as Dr. J. Vernon McGee states: "love in the will. It is love that chooses its object. It is a definition of God, for God is love."

Paul speaks to the church in Corinth on the preeminence of *agape* in these first verses. The Corinthians were very much fascinated by the gifts of the Spirit, and pursued them, it sometimes appears to the extreme. Even though these are "spiritual" pursuits, Paul points out that their misuse could actually damage the church's ability to be effective in bringing the unsaved to Christ.

So while Paul encourages them to seek and develop these things, at the close of chapter 12 he points the church to "a still more excellent way" as the

English Standard Version reads. I saw an illustration of that “more excellent way” that I really liked, which honestly surprised me given my dislike for math.

As Paul lists off some of the things that the Corinthian church liked to think it had locked up, he tries to make them understand something: If I have eloquence in all languages, but no love, it equals nothing. Prophecy without love; nothing. Knowledge minus love equals zero. Faith to move mountains, without love; nope, worthless. Sacrifice without love; zippo. Martyrdom! Still, without love; zero.

What we end up with is a string of zeros. But add love which is preeminent, which means first - most important - and suddenly all these zeros have value. Love is the thing that needs to be added to any gift you may possess, because without it, whatever that gift is, is worthless.

Notice that Paul never discounts the value of spiritual gifts. He simply informs the church that all of them must be exercised in love.

In verse 4 Paul moves from the value and necessity of love into its character; its virtue: *<sup>4</sup>Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, <sup>5</sup>is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Again, not definitions of love, but descriptors. The attributes of *agape*. Paul flip-flops here between what love is and what it is not.

Love is patient and kind. Some other translations read “long-suffering”. You ever heard people say “Don’t pray for patience, God might give you an opportunity to practice it.”? Is it an accident that the first word used to describe divine love is “patient”?

That means that no matter how much of a knucklehead you are, God loves you. And no matter how much of a knucklehead - insert name of knucklehead here - is...God loves them. So our prayers don’t need to be for patience, but for

the more excellent thing; love. And patience and kindness, being an attribute of love, will follow if we love.

Love is not envious. Another way to say that might be that love is content with whatever situation it finds itself in. We know this world is full of inequalities; someone that is not as hard-working as you got that promotion, or they got that new Harley, whatever. Pull two examples from scripture: the first murder, recorded in Genesis chapter 4, was caused by envy. Clearly no love was involved there.

Contrast that with the relationship that David shared with Saul's son, Jonathan: Jonathan, King Saul's own son and warrior prince of Israel, should have assumed the throne of Israel after his father. But Jonathan is aware at the time of their meeting that David is God's choice to be king. Jonathan's response is not one of envy. 1 Samuel 18 says Jonathan and David were one in the spirit. Jonathan had every right in our minds to be jealous of David's position, but he puts that aside, recognizes the will of God and supports David.

Love is not boastful. A young preacher at a conference rose to introduce himself during the opening hours, and the first thing out of his mouth was: "I want you to know I'm not a trained minister. I am an ignorant minister, and I am proud of it." The conference leader replied: "I can see you have a lot to be proud of, and, young man, it is dangerous to boast, even about ignorance." Oops.

*Love...is not arrogant, <sup>5</sup>is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. The New International Version translates verse 6: Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Gordon Fee in The New International Commentary on the New Testament states: "The person full of Christian love joins in rejoicing on the side of behavior that reflects the Gospel."*

If we are going to love as Christ calls us to love, we can't stand on the side of sin. We can't support someone that is destroying their marriage because they just ain't feeling it anymore. We can't affirm that people have the right to murder an unborn child. We not only can't engage in gossip, we must step in to point out

that that kind of behavior is unbecoming of a Christian. We do have to provide our children with Godly discipline. We must make a stand against people that would tear down Christian values in our society.

But we must do these things in love, which verse 7 says: *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*. Which simply means that love holds up under pressure, it doesn't regard people with suspicion, it is full of optimism, and even when tested to the extreme, it remains strong.

Let's review a bit. Remember, the Corinthian church placed a lot of value on spiritual gifts...they pursued them and prided themselves in possessing them, as if it was something they did, or they had. Paul in chapter 12 reminds them that these gifts come from God: *<sup>4</sup>Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. <sup>5</sup>There are different ministries, but the same Lord. <sup>6</sup>And there are different activities, but the same God produces each gift in each person.*

*<sup>7</sup>A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good: <sup>8</sup>to one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit, to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup>to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup>to another, the performing of miracles, to another, prophecy, to another, distinguishing between spirits, to another, different kinds of tongues, to another, interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup>One and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each person as he wills.*

Then, as we've seen so far, Paul tells them that love is necessarily included in the exercise of the gifts, because they are categorically useless without love, and it's not only necessary to be included, but love needs to come first in the exercise of every gift.

And then, in verses 8-13, he tells them why love is preeminent; because out of all these things, only love is permanent. We're going to skip the first part of verse 8 for the moment, and read on:

*But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;* we've already seen that. In Paul's time, they had already seen that. When would a prophecy cease to be prophetic? When it's fulfilled! Jesus had come. He was crucified, died, was

buried, rose again and ascended to heaven in fulfillment of prophecy, and now those prophecies have come to an end.

*As for tongues, they will cease;* Paul speaks at length to the Corinthians about what the gift of tongues is for and how that gift is to be used to edify the body and to evangelize. But there will come a time when the task that we have been given, to evangelize the lost, will be at an end and tongues will cease. We won't need them; we'll be speaking in our native tongue.

There's a song by the band Switchfoot playing on Air 1 called Native Tongue. Anyone heard it? You know what your native tongue is? Love. Kinda convenient for the purposes of my message today...thank you, Switchfoot...

*As for knowledge, it will come to an end.* We study and study to learn things for school, things for work, things for our walk with God, and thank you Lord, there will come a time when we don't have to do that no more! And it's not that knowledge will be irrelevant, but that even the brainiest among us will suddenly realize how much they didn't know, and how much we got wrong.

Verse 9: *<sup>9</sup>For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup>but when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>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 put aside childish things.*

Verses 9-11 tell us outright, we don't know what we think we know. Paul equates the knowledge we have now to that of a child. A child thinks that he knows what he knows. The way he sees it, is the way it is, and there's no way you're going to tell him any different. Paul says that as he matured, so did his speech and reasoning, his understanding. And when you are grown, people should be able to expect a certain level of maturity from you.

Verse 12 is interesting; *<sup>12</sup>For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known.* I don't know how your eyesight is holding up, but anymore when I look in a mirror, my reflection is unrecognizable. I know it's there; I can see the shape, and I trust that that's me in there, but that's about it. I think that's what this means, we can see, we just can't see well.

But there's coming a time when we will see with high definition clarity, and we will have full knowledge. This is the passage that made me quit saying "I'll ask when I get to heaven", because we won't need to. We'll know.

So I told you I'd come back to the first part of verse 8...the CSB says: *Love never ends*. Many translations of verse 8 read: *Love never fails*. And I know there are people in this room today that are trying really hard not to snort right now. Let me tell you a story about a very unusual military funeral that was held in California not so long ago.

Sgt. First Class Joseph Gantt, who fought in both World War II and the Korean War, was laid to rest, in December of 2013. He had been captured in Korea in December of 1950 and died in captivity in March of the following year. But his death was never confirmed by the North Koreans, and his body was not returned for many years.

His wife, Clara, not knowing Joseph's fate, waited for decades for her husband to come back. She regularly went to meetings with government officials seeking information about what had happened. Clara even bought a house, had it professionally landscaped, and hired a gardener so all Joseph would have to do when he came home was go fishing.

She was ninety-four years old when his remains were finally brought home for a military funeral with full honors. It wasn't the homecoming she dreamed of, but she finally had her answers, and she finally had her husband home.

Clara told a reporter who interviewed her, "He told me if anything happened to him, he wanted me to remarry. And I told him 'No, no.' You had a hard time getting me to say yes, and there won't be no more marriage. Here I am, still his wife, and I'm going to remain his wife until the day the Lord calls me home."

That's a "love never fails" story, isn't it? Now I'm going to go cynic on you for a second, because I know somewhere there's a couple of people thinking, "Yeah, it would be easy to stay married if I didn't have to come home to ol' so-

and-so every day.” Or you’re thinking “Don’t sit here and tell me love never fails. You don’t know what I’m going through.”

Well, I do, actually. I know that some of you are going through what you would describe as a failure of love in this season of your life. I, too, have seen love fail in the lives and marriage of my parents, and I’ve seen it fail in my own life. You know why? Because just like our knowledge and reasoning are flawed, so is our love. And because what I thought was love, was never really love.

Last verse; verse 13: <sup>13</sup>*Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love — but the greatest of these is love.* There are a lot of different thoughts on what exactly Paul was trying to get across here. I’ll tell you where I land. Paul has spent much of this chapter clarifying why love is important, and what it does. As he wraps up here, he adds faith and hope because they are the attributes that naturally accompany love.

He wants the Christian to know that these things work together to accomplish the work of evangelism, and that they are the reason for evangelism in a world that doesn’t have much faith, hope or love in it.

And Paul takes all three of the properties of love that we’ve been reading about; it’s value, character and permanence and sets them in concrete right here. Out of all the things that we can talk about in theology, love is the greatest. Why? Love alone will last.

When we are free of this world and stand with God, the object of our faith will be fulfilled. There will be no need for faith. All our hopes will be realized. There will be nothing left to hope for, so there will be no need for hope.

But love will remain, because it is the very nature of God. The apostle John writes in 1 John 4:7-8: <sup>7</sup>*Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.* <sup>8</sup>*The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

Let's reach back to Pastor Erik's message from last week - are you seeking eternal things? Are you in search of the things of God? I know that can feel tough sometimes.

Maybe this past week you've been working on your list of the activities that cause you to set your heart on Godly things and your list has gotten so long that you're overwhelmed.

Let me shorten it up for you. Ready? Write this down. Two things.

1) Seek Love.

2) See Number 1.

If, as the apostle John says, God is love, God *is agape*, and he is, then if you seek love you will always find God. And as you seek to grow in love you will automatically fulfill the command that John gives us just a few verses later: <sup>10</sup>*Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another.*

Want to know if you're abiding in the will of God? Do you love?

Want to know if you're making an impact for the Kingdom of God? Do you love?

I told you before, I can't define my wife's face for you. I can describe it, but not in a way that you could understand it unless you have spent the kind of time with her that I have.

I can't define *agape* for you. Again, I can describe it, but not in a way that you can understand it. It just wouldn't do it justice. You have to experience *agape*.

In order to do that you have to spend time with the one that is Love. And in order to spend time with him, you have to know him. Do you know Love? Do you know Christ? Do you know that even if you think that your sin is too much for him to forgive, that he already has, because he loves you?

He always has, and he won't ever stop. In fact, the only reason that you won't spend eternity with him is because you won't love him back. It's your choice to seek him. Maybe you haven't had a lot of experience with a perfect and permanent love. I pray that you choose him today, so that you can.

Those of you that know God...can anybody tell?

See if you remember this from last week's message: the C.S. Lewis quote - "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."

How about this: "When we are offended, we do things differently. When we're hurt we do things differently. When the inexcusable happens, we do things differently."

You have accepted Jesus into your heart and acknowledged that great sacrifice of pain and suffering...loss and love. You've take on the name of Christ, Christian! Act like it. In everything you do, put love in front of it.

When you get offended, hurt and angry, do things differently. Look for a way to bring love into that situation before you respond.

If you must correct someone, seek love first.

If you must discipline, put love before it.

When you pray, start with love.

When you make a stand for your faith, hold love up for the world to see.

When you evangelize, let the world see God in you, because God is love.

If you want to be surrounded by beautiful people, love them as if they already are. Strive to see them how God sees them. It won't be easy, it will not be easy. But it is our call, our command. Here comes that Beatles song...Love, love, love.