

THE GREATEST IS LOVE

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

Happy Valentine's Day! Let's talk about love. First Corinthians 13 is the love chapter, but not the way you think.

The good folks of the church at Corinth were not getting along. They were fussing, feuding, spitting, and in general not acting very Christian.

In fact this letter is the Apostle Paul's response about what was going on. For 12 chapters he talks about their problems. In chapter 13 he says, "Time out! Start loving the way Christians should love; these problems in the church will disappear."

"I love you" are the three most powerful and potentially transforming words anyone can say or hear. Love gives meaning. Love gives hope. Love makes us feel good. Love is God's greatest gift of all to us.

We often diminish the meaning of love by saying it without really meaning it, or by applying love to things. All too often our society counterfeits love with sex. How many young men have said, "I love you," to get what they want? How many young women have fallen for it?

Love is hard for some to do because they've never seen it done well. The truth is we can experience real love and we can express real love. When we learn to love, all the rest of life can be supernaturally transformed for good.

If we can get love right, other things just seem to fall into place. If we don't get love right, then everything else is askew in our world.

At the end of chapter 12 Paul begins chapter 13 with, "And now I will show you the most excellent way." He didn't say "A most excellent way," but "The most excellent way."

Love can be the romantic kind that we celebrate on Valentine's Day, it can be affectionate love, and it can be brotherly fondness. All of these are emotional love.

The love Paul directs us to in this chapter is a godly, self-denying love. The Greek word is

agape, the word used throughout this chapter. Agape is an act of the will.

Just as God loves us even though we are sinners and undeserving of His love, He gives us the ability to love others in the same way.

1. Without love everything else is nothing (vv. 1-3)

(1) What if I speak in another language? (v. 1)

I would love to be able to speak fluent Spanish. I had 4 years in High School, but then didn't ever use it. Now, 46 years later, it's like I never studied it at all.

But even if I could witness to my Hispanic friends and neighbors in Spanish, if I didn't love them it would mean nothing—just a resounding gong or clanging symbol.

(2) What if I am really smart? (v. 2)

Wouldn't it be great to be educated in everything from science to history to literature? Not only educated, but able to explain profound truths others cannot figure out?

And what if I had the faith to cure cancer, bring world peace, and move mountains? Even with all that, without love I would be nothing.

(3) What about generosity? (v. 3)

What if I were rich enough to give away millions of dollars a year? Wouldn't it be great to help the poor and support wonderful causes?

Imagine how impressive it would be to be known as the most generous person in the world. But even generosity can be selfish if done for the wrong reasons. If it is done for any other reason than love, you gain nothing. Here's Paul's definition of love:

2. The definition of godly love:

(1) Love is patient (v. 4)

The Greek word Paul uses here refers to people, not circumstances. He is talking about being patient with one another in the church, with our neighbors, friends, other students, and coworkers. We have to be patient with people.

(2) Love is kind (v. 4)

This means to be nice to each other. It means to do good things to others even if no one ever does good things for you. Romans 15:1-2 says it this way, We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2Each of us should please his neigh-

bor for his good, to build him up.

(3) Love is not envious, boastful or proud (v. 4)

Envy is when you resent the good fortune of another—you resent when someone has success, possessions, or happiness. Envy is when you feel good when something bad happens to others, and bad when good happens.

Being boastful and proud is just another way of saying to others that you are better than them. You are setting yourself above them. It's as if you think you don't need them. Trash talking in sports is an example.

(4) Love is not rude (v. 5)

Rudeness is always evident. The rude person pushes to the front of the line, interrupts conversations, says embarrassing and insulting things about others, and is vulgar without regard to the sensibilities of others (i.e., language in a public place). Rude people generally disrespect others. Love is not like that.

(5) Love is not self-seeking (v. 5)

This is another description of rudeness. A self-seeking person tries to put themselves ahead of others. This person always demands his or her rights. They insist on special treatment. They constantly threaten lawsuits.

You see these kinds of people everywhere you go—restaurants, airports, schools, churches, even at home. [IHOP] They are demanding and complaining. They want to be served, but seldom volunteer to serve others. They want to know what's in it for them.

(6) Love is not easily angered (v. 5)

When someone easily loses his or her temper, love is missing. That's just a fact. This person has no self-control. She gets irritated easily. He flares up and swears a lot.

These are the road-rage warriors on the highway, air-rage in the sky, customer-rage at the department store, church-rage at church, and family-rage at home. [Airport]

Love is not like that. Even when it is provoked it keeps its temper under control. Love is slow to get angry. On those occasions that it does, it's for the right reasons. Jesus Christ's anger at the money changers is a good example.

(7) Love doesn't keep a record of wrongs (v. 5)

The Greek word used here comes from accounting and refers to a ledger sheet. Some people keep careful detailed memories of the faults and failures of others.

But people who love are great forgetters. They keep short accounts and don't hold yesterday's sins against you today

(8) Love does not delight in evil but rejoice with the truth (v. 6)

Some people love to hear about the bad things that happen to others. They can't wait to hear the latest gossip—who's in trouble at school, who was busted for drugs, whose marriage is in trouble, who's having an affair, and so on.

Godly love is saddened by sin and happy with truth and good.

(9) Love always protects (v. 7)

Those who have godly love protect the reputation of others. They don't drag others shame out into the open. If you love me you will protect my reputation.

You will do your best to make me look good. You would never intentionally do anything to hurt me. And love would cause me to do the same for you.

(10) Love always trusts (v. 7)

Godly love simply trusts people. Love trusts God. Yes, sometimes people take advantage. Yes, sometimes they hurt us. Love continues to trust because of the deep conviction that God can make even the worst of things somehow come together for good.

(11) Love always hopes (v. 7)

People who love with the love of God do not give up on others. They hang in there even when it doesn't seem to make much sense. Love just hangs onto hope when everyone else has given up [Grandma's love for Uncle Don].

(12) Love always perseveres (v. 7)

Godly love is like the energizer bunny—it keeps going, and going, and going. Love never quits. This doesn't mean just passive acceptance.

Love rises above the circumstances and endures problems and pain that would take most others down. You can't beat it down because it just won't give up.

(13) Love never fails (vv. 8, 13)

This is what it all leads up to. The weather changes, cars wear out, our bodies get old, careers come to an end, and death finally comes.

But love is permanent. It never fails. It continues beyond us into eternity. The greatest of all is love. Now you see why...

3. Love is the most excellent way

Wouldn't you like to be loved like this? And wouldn't you like to love like this? You can know, because Jesus loves you. He loves you with an everlasting love.

It doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter what you have done, it doesn't matter what your attitude is—Jesus loves you so much that he died for you.

And because of his everlasting love for you, you, too, can learn to love like this. Dolly Madison, wife of the fourth president of the United States, was one of the most popular women in American history. Wherever she went, she charmed and captivated everyone, obscure and well-known, rich and poor, men and women alike.

She was once asked to explain the secret of her power over others. Surprised by the question Mrs. Madison exclaimed, "Power over people. I have none. I desire none. I merely love everyone."

We all struggle with life and with people and circumstances. Every single one of us faces everything from irritations to injustices. Some people blow up. Some become resentful and hateful.

Some become angry and bitter. Some hold grudges and try to get even. Some develop a victim mentality—poor me, woe is me, everyone hates me, I think I'll eat some worms.

Remember, the people in the church at Corinth did not love one another. Paul's letter is an attempt to try to straighten out the divisions, moral failures and spitefulness in the church.

Agape kind of love is not born out of a personal need. It doesn't exist in order to get what it wants but empties itself to give what the other needs.

Agape lives in order to die to self for the blessedness of caring for another, spending for another, spending itself for the sake of someone else.

Agape love is superior. To live a life of love is to believe what God says and to take His side. Agape love is listed first among the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Without love other virtues are not virtues at all. From love is born all that is good.

This kind of love shares God's perspective on everything. Love is doing it God's way. Love won't always make life easier, but it will make life better and make you feel better about yourself.

"But," you say, "I don't know how to live like this. I didn't grow up that way. I don't have models to follow." Yes you do, starting with Christ himself. Then there are other Christians whom you admire who live like this. Model yourself after them.

Jesus loves you, he really, really loves you. The more you learn of him and experience him, the more his love will flow out of you.

Application:

The more we understand “the incomparable riches” of God’s love for us, the more conscious we become of the shallowness of our love for Him. We know we ought to love Him, as we consider all He has done for us through His death on the Cross for our sins, but whether we do love Him, in actual daily fact and experience, can only be shown by how we love others. Paul said that love is the most excellent way for us to live our Christian lives. It is the only way for us to truly let others see Jesus in our lives.