

1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13

Endless Love

One of my favorite songs growing up was called, Endless Love. As I ponder the title I can hear Lionel Ritchie and Dianna Ross just belting out the notes. I couldn't think of a better title because of what we will study today. 1 Corinthians 13 has traditionally been known as the Love Chapter. It is a familiar passage often used in weddings and tends to make us reflect on the way we should love those we are romantically involved with. However, I am going to ask you a favor before we begin. Let's put Cupid aside. Even though Valentines Day is coming up in a couple of weeks, I am going to ask you not to read your romantic life into the text. At Northside, we are concerned with exegesis, which means to "pull out." We want to pull the meaning out of the text. Isogesis on the other hand, is making the Bible say what you want it to mean, that is, pulling out your own meaning. We are primarily concerned with what Paul had to say first to the Corinthian church; and then using this passage to ponder our own relationships. With that being said, in chapter 12, Paul was writing about spiritual gifts in the church. Many people were flaunting the spiritual gifts and making others feel bad because they did not have a certain gift. Instead of building each other up; they were tearing each other apart. The three spiritual gifts that caused pride and envy were tongues, knowledge, and prophecy. In a brilliant stroke of the feather, Paul offers a temporary reprieve in order to put spiritual gifts in perspective. This leads us to the first principle.

1. Love, Not Possessions or Accolades Defines a Person

13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

What the Corinthians forgot was that possessing spiritual gifts like tongues, prophecy, and the word of knowledge did not make them more spiritual people. As great as these gifts were; they weren't the primary ways God commended them. To suggest to someone God cares about you because of a certain gift you possess is what my German born mom would pronounce as "ridiculus!" It was just ridiculus to think that someone is more spiritual based on the gifts they possessed.

The other hypothetical illustration Paul uses here is those who would be known for their accolades. He hypothetically uses the examples of having a faith that removes mountains or someone who chooses to be sacrificially barbecued. Such people are known for their possessions, that is, spiritual gifts, and for their accolades, experiencing the ultimate suntan. In short, without love, these possessions and accolades are nothing. What God cares about in the end was whether I loved Him and love people.

So the practical question that comes to mind is simply this: What defines you?

- 1. *Is it your money?***
- 2. *Your beauty?***
- 3. *Your accolades, that is, past accomplishments?***
- 4. *Your knowledge?***
- 5. *Your prayer life?***
- 6. *Your self control***
- 7. *Is it your possessions?***
- 8. *Your faithfulness?***
- 9. *Your abilities or gifts?***
- 10. *Your submissive nature?***

What is it that defines you? If you are not sure ask yourself this: How do others define me? If you are only known for what you possess and your accolades, you need to meditate on this passage. Without love you are nothing! God is not impressed with your personal resume. Instead he focuses on your heart. How have you loved Him? How have you loved your neighbor? Paul already mentioned that the essence of love is to build someone up. So them whose lives are you building into?

Today, Luke and Denise dedicated their baby. As a result, they committed themselves to God and this congregation that they will raise little Mark in the ways of Jesus. In the process the child will learn many things. He will also learn about his parents. He will learn that his mom likes to be involved in many things and that she can communicate with the best of them. He will learn that his dad is a good provider and that he is very smart. But in the end, those things won't really matter to the child. What will matter is whether his mom and dad loved him. If he says yes, then all the qualities and characteristics that define Luke and Denise will just be more reason for the child to respect his parents. However, if the child does not feel loved; the child will dismiss their gifts or attributes and think of them simply as clanging symbols. Without love, Paul says, we are nothing.

So now that I have challenged you to reflect on your lives, the next question is this: What does it mean to love? This leads me to my second principle.

Love is Foremost a behavior; not a Feeling

Here, Paul doesn't define love; he describes what the behavior does and does not look like. He begins with two positive descriptions and then moves to eight descriptions that illustrate what was happening in Corinth; finally he concludes with five more behaviors inherent in love. **4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

Love is patient and kind: Here patient is used in the sense of long-suffering. Kindness refers to giving. The best way to understand these two are to think about God the Father. In the Bible He is known as a long-suffering God. One who is patient for others to come to Christ, despite the sin in us that is rebellious. He is also kind in the sense that he gives despite our sinful nature and abandonment of Him as our object of worship. The Bible teaches what is known as common grace. This refers to natural elements such as rain for crops, which he gives to the righteous and wicked. Lastly God shows kindness through what is known simply as grace. He loved the world despite his long-suffering enough to give us His son as a propitiation for our sins. In the end, that is long-suffering that still manifests itself in kindness.

One of the hardest things to do in any relationship is to show kindness to others when you are long-suffering. It is easy to show kindness when things are going good for you. I look at the couples here who have been together for 25 years or more. On the surface we tend to think they were just naturally predispositioned to love each other because it is so obvious they do. However, as you listen to their stories one thing becomes evidently clear. What you see today was a result of longsuffering and kindness. They are what they are because they did not quit; but hung in there and still found the ability to show kindness.

The descriptions of the behavior of love are what it does not look like. The implication is obvious. This is what was happening in the church of Corinth.

Love does not envy or boast

Of course, those in the church of Corinth demonstrated both of these negative qualities when it came to spiritual gifts. Some boasted of their heightened sense of spirituality because they did speak in tongues. "You may be better looking than I am; but I speak the heavenly language of angels!" Others were envious of those who spoke in tongues. You can just imagine them thinking: "How come I don't have that gift?" Today, you might hear some say, "How come I'm not as beautiful as her? How come he has money and I'm barely making it? How come my health is not great like theirs?"

It is not arrogant or rude

Arrogance and rudeness were happening during the Lord's Supper. If you remember, the rich were gathered together in the triclinium, the ancient version of a dining room. The poor were gathered in the atrium where the church met corporately. The rich were eating all the food, getting drunk, and then talking the Lord's Supper without waiting on the poor. This arrogance and rudeness was in such opposition to what the Lord's Supper represented; then God caused illness and death because they were going down the path of condemnation. In this sense, God's judgment showed kindness.

I can't think of much anything more unpleasant than people who are in relationships that are consistently arrogant and rude to each other. Though there may be brief episodes of kindness; ultimately, at the core of most of these relationships

is contempt for each other, which is worthy of condemnation according to the teachings of Jesus at the Mt of Beatitudes (Matthew 5:22).

It does not insist on its own way

This can also refer to as self-seeking. The Corinthians were self-seeking in that they held knowledge as the highest virtue. That was what they valued and sought to obtain. But Paul told the church that knowledge “puffs up.” The focus is always on the individual whereas love builds up others.

In relationships, I will refer to the analogy of a donut. There are those that state, “I love donuts.” But they don’t really love donuts; they want to consume the donut. They want to eat the donut because it will bring about satisfaction! There are also people who claim they love so and so. But judging by their actions, they don’t love the other person; they want what the other person can give them, like sex. If you really love the person you will protect the integrity of the person. You will sacrifice your sexual wants for the person. Relationships can’t be self-seeking. You can’t treat people like donuts.

It is not irritable (easily angered) or resentful (keeping a record of wrongs)

Irritability is simply the byproduct of people who are easily angered. This can get to the point where the smallest thing can make someone angry. Resentful describes a person that tends to hold onto the misgivings of others. Instead of forgiveness they keep a record of all their wrongs. They are the ones in arguments that bring up the past and use it as their weapon. “I’ll never forget when you did this to me because that really hurt! But honey, “You told me you forgave me?” Yeah!

There were a lot of things happening at the church that would cause others to be easily angered and resentful. They were depriving each other of sex in the context of marriage; they were suing each other; they would not pay their founding pastor.

In a relationship, I think the first warning sign that the partnership is going south is when a couple becomes irritable and resentful of each other. These issues must be dealt with because without love, which manifests itself in forgiveness, the relationship will begin to erode... like that park bench inscription that reads, “Mary loves John forever.”

It does not rejoice at wrongdoing (delight in evil)

This is the last of the “*what love is not*” statements. Unfortunately, this was manifested at Corinth when others in the church were boasting about a man in the congregation that was sleeping with either his mother, or mother-in-law. Imagine rejoicing over such a despicable act as that.

In relationships today, I have seen people hurt each other and then feel good because they have done so. There is this mentality that says, “You hurt me; so now I am going to hurt you even more.” What I have discovered is that initially they may rejoice to an extent but ultimately they realize what they have done is wrong. Unfortunately, as they saying goes; “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” In the end, the relationship is set back and eventually may come to the point where reconciliation is unlikely, save a miracle of God. Paul says that is not love; real love rejoices with the truth.

Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things.

Finally, Paul concludes by stating in the affirmative that love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. This description will lead to Paul’s next point in the next section, mainly that love will never fail. Consequently, “bears all things” means it puts up with a lot. It is still willing to forgo the battle. Love “Believes all things” refers having faith in its object of affection. Love, “Hopes all things” simply means love does not give up or lose hope. Lastly, love “endures all things” means that love will never fail. Like the energizer bunny it keeps on going. This leads us to our final principle.

Love will Never Fail You; Everything Else Will

8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 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 gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

So Paul concludes with a passage that has caused quite a bit of controversy in the church since 1906, three years after the Pentecostal movement broke out in Topeka, Kansas. The issue revolves around these gifts, which are known as revelatory gifts.

Many conservatives look at this passage as a proof text that the revelatory gifts (prophecy, tongues, Word of Knowledge) no longer operate in the church. Paul clearly says that at some point these gifts will no longer be necessary. The question is *when* will this occur? The debate stems from the phrase which states, "*when the perfect comes.*" What is Paul referring to when he uses that phrase? Remember he says, that when this *perfect* comes prophecies will pass away, tongues will cease, and knowledge will pass away.

Before 1906, the common understanding of this phrase referred to the Second Coming of Christ. This seemed to fit the context because none of these gifts will not be necessary at the end of the age.

Since 1906 other scholars have said this refers to the New Testament. Thus, they view the completed Bible as this *perfect*, which means prophecy, tongues, and the Word of Knowledge have ceased. In other words, we don't need any more revelatory gifts because the written Word of God is recorded in our Bibles. Again, this interpretation was in reaction to Pentecostalism, which emphasized these revelatory gifts, especially tongues.

Still others have said *the Perfect* refers to the maturity of the church. Thus, when the church is mature, the revelatory gifts will pass away. Some have gone so far as to say this happened in the first century when the church finally established itself as an establishment in the world.

I favor the traditional interpretation before 1906 because I definitely think the text is being stretched if someone suggests *the perfect* refers to the New Testament Canon. That would not have meant anything to the 1st century church in Corinth. Secondly, I would not describe the church as mature because even today there are divisions. The same things that were happening in Corinth are happening today. In the end, we still need these gifts of diversity. Lastly, the second coming contextually makes more sense because we won't need the revelatory gifts at the end of the age. At that time, we will see Jesus, face to face. The only thing that will survive is love.

In the end, that is Paul's point. He says even with these revelatory gifts, we only know and prophesy in part. In other words, revelatory gifts or not; they are still limited and incomplete. At this point in time, Paul states we look into a mirror dimly. This analogy would hit home with the Corinthians, since one of the major trades was producing bronze mirrors. But as the church knew, even if metal is polished; your reflection would be diminished because it is a metal mirror. Don't believe me; go to a rest stop and look through one of their metal mirrors. It does not do justice to our true reflection. One is often seen moving very close to these types of mirrors because they are looking for a better reflection. But Paul goes on and says, though we see dimly today; one day we will see face-to-face! That is what I believe Paul is referring to when he says *the perfect* will come. Jesus will take away our ignorance and pride and allow everyone, revelatory gifts or not; to understand who he really is. That will be a day of enlightenment.

But in our ignorance today, we are like children and we reason like children. One day we will put these childish ways to rest. Borrowing Paul's analogy, one day we will become men (and women)! At that time we will understand what John meant in his first epistle when he stated, *Jesus is love*. Love is the greatest virtue in the Christian faith and it is the only one that will be evident in heaven. I can't wait till we all meet again in heaven and finally see clearly with love and appreciation for one another. That will truly be a time of endless love.