

LESSONS FROM CORINTHIANS I Corinthians 13:1-13

When couples are planning to marry, they often want scripture read as a part of their ceremony. I have seen a few verses in Ecclesiastes used [two better than one], Ephesians 5 used and the words in the Book of Ruth, “where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge.” I don’t recommend the latter reading at your wedding, because it is the statement of a widow to her mother-in-law. If you are getting married you probably don’t want to go and live with your mother-in-law. However, by far, the most used passage of scripture at a wedding is 1 Corinthians 13. This passage is a great chapter to read at weddings and is applicable for marriage, but I want you to understand that the chapter is not given in the context of marriage. It is given in the context of the church. Paul is concerned about the welfare of the church. He wants to see tangible expressions of love in the church.

Unfortunately, those expressions had been missing in the Corinthian church. Members were suing one another. There was a display of selfishness in exercising their freedom in Christ, divisions over personalities/leaders in the church, selfishness at the Lord’s table, prideful positions over the gifts, etc.

I remember walking on the campus at seminary only a day or two after I got there for my first semester, and this student walked up to me out of the blue, and asked, “Have you received the gift?” I knew what he meant. What he was saying is that I have a gift, and if you don’t have what I have, I am better than you. I can still feel his arrogance, my anger and the lack of love in that attitude. These are some of the things going on at Corinth.

So, Paul calls them to the more excellent way. Let’s read this chapter.

And now I will show you the most excellent way.

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

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

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, but 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 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.

And these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love [1 Corinthians 13:13].

One of the first things to do in grasping the meaning of this text is to understand what Paul means by love. There is such a broad use of the word “love” that we may not understand what Paul is saying in these verses. We hear people say I love _____ [fill in the blank] and that refers to:

a poodle with a bow in its fur

a new car [I love the smell of a new car]

a favorite food [I love fried chicken, banana pudding, onion rings—I just love the restaurant has those things]

a new outfit [In fact, I just love spending money]

a teacher

So, we use love to describe something or someone we like, things that suit us, people and things we feel close to or have an emotional tie with, one that we are attracted to sexually, the feeling that we

have toward certain things and people, something we make, something that we fall in and out of, etc. Love understood like this is not what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 13.

Therefore, the first order of business is to understand this love. Paul is talking about God, Who is love, and the expression of His love through us. This love of Chapter 13 is not from us. It is not from our making. The source of this love is God.

THE SOURCE OF LOVE

Those of us who know God through a personal relationship with Jesus have no excuse for not loving because the love of God has been poured into our hearts.

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which He has given us [Romans 5:5].

This love does not come from us but God. He gives it to us. It has been deposited with us in ample, plentiful, generous supply. It just needs to be expressed. Expressing this love is not something that I try to do. We don't "work on being more loving." It is a gift to be shared. The Holy Spirit is within us to help us understand this love and express it.

In Galatians 5:22 Paul writes about the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control [cf. this to the qualities of love in 1 Corinthians 13]. The fruit of the Spirit is love. What He wants to express through my life is love. The other words here are giving expression to and describing Godly love.

joy is love enjoying itself
peace is love resting
patience is love waiting
kindness is love reacting
goodness is love choosing
faithfulness is love keeping its word
gentleness is love empathizing
self-control is love resisting temptation

That love is within us. It needs to be expressed. It is the manifestation of a new nature and the evidence of the Spirit within us. Lack of love calls into question the presence of the Spirit in one's life and thus the whole relationship with God.

The second thing that we need to understand is the nature of this love. You begin to understand what Paul is talking about when you realize that God's love is a love that sacrifices. His love is revealed in the sacrificial death of His Son. It is a self-less love.

THE NATURE OF LOVE

The love of chapter 13 is not a mushy, emotional love. It is not just a feeling. It is not something that we fall in and out of. It is not something that we make. It is something objective, grounded in God. It is love given to us by God Who loves sacrificially. Listen to what Paul said in Romans.

But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us [Romans 5:8].

Look at John 3.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" [John 3:16].

This is a sacrificial love for the sake of others even when they were enemies. Understand this love—God so loved that He gave [sacrificed what was most precious to Him].

God's love is the love of the cross. That is how it is defined. That is how it is expressed. It is tied to sacrifice and self-giving. Jesus died for us, He became poor for us, He was bruised for our iniquity, etc. That kind of love is what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 13. In Ephesians 5 when husbands are asked to love their wives as Christ loved the church, it is love that requires sacrifice. This is not loving only when the recipient is worthy. This is loving regardless of the worthiness of the recipient because of

the nature of the lover. This is God's kind of love. This is Paul is talking about the expression of selfless, sacrificial love in the church. We actively seek the benefit of others.

Paul goes on to say that if our lives do now manifest this love of God, then regardless of what we do or think we accomplish, our lives are nothing in the sight of God. Scary isn't it? We can dazzle the crowds, make mountains move with our faith, give mega bucks to meet needs, but apart from God's love, our lives are nothing before Him.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LOVE

There has been a program on TV in the last year that featured Secret Millionaires. The episodes featured millionaires who went to various cities and learned about needs and ministries that were serving in underprivileged areas. After becoming familiar with these areas for a week, the millionaires would choose which ministries to give money to and how much.

I liked that show. The thing that interested me most was trying to detect which givers were believers and which recipients were not believers. And often you could tell. Even though the show did not focus on that, by listening to the language that the givers and recipients used, seeing a Bible being read, etc., you could tell who were probably believers. What impressed me the most was not the millionaires but the people who were giving sacrificially of their lives, their time and their means, even against incredible odds, to minister in difficult, dangerous and impoverished situations to make a difference in peoples' lives. It was true that the money helped. But the most powerful thing was the way some of these people were loving. Their love was effective. It was making a difference. That is what God's love expressed through us does. It is effective. It changes lives.

This is the love that Paul wants expressed in the church. It is a love where we are willing to sacrifice and lay ourselves aside for the benefit of others. Our lives without this love don't make a real difference. Sure, somebody may benefit from a gift of our money, somebody may be benefited from the word of prophecy, somebody may be helped with a word of knowledge—but in the long run, those things count for nothing.

You see both the demonstration of this love and lack of this love so clearly in the story of the Prodigal Son—or better the story of the Loving Father.

The selfless father was ready to do anything for a son who didn't deserve it. It was the nature of the love of the father that made him love, not the worthiness of the son. His love

Was patient—he looked up that road everyday

Was kind—he welcomed him with compassion

Kept no record of wrongs

Trusted, hoped, persevered

It was the love of God.

Remember that Jesus told this parable following the statement that the Pharisees had made.

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” [Luke 15:2].

The Pharisees were saying what God was like. Jesus, hearing this, told three parables to tell them what God was really like. When you read the way the father treated the prodigal son, you see the expression of love in 1 Corinthians 13.

On the other hand, there was the selfish older brother. The scary thing is that the older brother was a son and lived with the father. But he did not manifest the love of the father.

He was not patient. He had no patience for his younger brother.

He was not kind.

He envied.

He was proud and boasted of all he had done and how he was better than his brother.

He was self-seeking.

He kept his list of wrongs.

He appeared faithful, he was hard-working, he was diligent, he was obedient...but he didn't express the love of the father. With all the good stuff that he did, in the sight of God it all added up to "0". Sad isn't it? What a warning for us!

FOCUS OF LOVE

The love that we find in 1 Corinthians 13 needs to be expressed in our marriages, our relationships, etc. But, remember the context of 1 Corinthians 13. Paul wants this love expressed in the church. If that does not happen, then the body will not function well nor honor Christ.

We are ready to transition to a new church year and we are also in the process of transitioning to new pastoral leadership. What a time for the expression of God's through our lives. Later today we will have our leadership summit. Many of you will be putting in many hours of service this year. Some of you will be with the little ones. Others of you will be teaching/helping with the children. Others will be working in the student area. Others will be teaching and working with adults.

Remember—regardless of your gifts, regardless of how much you give, regardless of the hours you put in, regardless of your faithfulness—without love, the record sheet will say "0" and you will be ineffective.

As we anticipate a pastoral transition, as we manifest that sacrificing, selfless love that works for the benefit of others this place will be a place of blessing, will bring glory to God and will be a magnet to draw people to the Lord.

If you know God through a saving relationship in Christ, this love is within you. We just need to give ourselves to Him and ask Him to express it through us. Let's ask Him to do that.