

## **“The Greatest is Love.”**

1 Cor 13:1-13

9.19.21

Have you ever had to describe yourself to someone in just three words? Maybe you are at a job interview or at a youth group icebreaker and that question comes up. It is not easy to whittle down who you are in three words. But what if you were asked to describe yourself with just one word? What word best describes you? Committed? Athlete? Industrious? Gentle? Learner? Musical?

What if you could only use one word to describe God? What word would you use? Holy? Righteous? Just? The word that I think the Bible would use describe God is love.

John writes, “But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” 1 John 4:8 (NLT)

God the Father, Son and Spirit has been eternally happy. There was no need for anything or anyone else. No need for any other relationships. For God has no needs. But He chose to create so that He could share His love with us. We are purposefully made in His image so that we can have the capacity to love back. So that we can choose to love Him or disobey Him.

You were made for a personal, loving relationship with God. However, all humanity sinned and is incapable of making things right with God. In love, God sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross- sinless Jesus for our sins in order to make us right with God.

As Jesus walked this earth He proclaimed the greatest commandments. Matthew 22:37–39 (ESV), “And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

What demonstrates a true disciple of Jesus to those around us? Our strong convictions against things of the world? Our personal stance on vaccines? Our Facebook posts for or against a certain government official?

Jesus said in the turbulent times, under Roman rule, and fitting for our time, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35 (ESV)

Love is the foundation of a health family. Love is the foundation of a healthy Church. And regarding the passage we will be discussing, love is the foundation of spiritual gifts.

Context is essential when reading a passage of scripture. Remember, we start with the surrounding context, then the context of the book, then context in relation to the whole of God’s Word.

1 Cor 13 is a well known passage on love. It is used in all sorts of situations. It is used in greeting cards. It is a popular text at weddings. It was preached last Mother’s Day- as an encouragement to mothers.

1 Corinthians 13 is sandwiched between chapter 12 which deals with the analogy of the body of Christ. We see that every member/ Christian has at least one gift. Every member is a minister in Christ’s body. Every member has a different function in the body of Christ. Every member’s gifting and ministry is important. Every member belongs to the others.

On the other side of chapter 13, Paul writes about the spiritual gifts of prophesy and tongues in chapter 14, which we will look at in detail next week.

It is in the context of these chapters about exercising our spiritual gifts that Paul is calling for love.

It is also in the context of spiritual gifts that help us to make sense of some of the verses that are often overlooked when focusing on the popular verses of 4-7.

What we are going to find in our study this morning is that: **Love is to be the predominant characteristic of the Christian.**

Please turn with me to 1 Cor 13. It is on page 959 in the Bibles underneath the chairs. Starting with chapter 12:31. "But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. <sup>1</sup> If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. <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 gave up childish ways. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." 1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13 (ESV)

Before we get into the meat of the passage, we are going to do a quick review of the purpose of spiritual gifts.

First, **spiritual gifts are to be used for the benefit of others.**

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received **to serve others**, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." 1 Pet. 4:10. God has given each

believer in Christ at least one spiritual gift at their conversion in order to build up others in the church.

Second, **spiritual gifts produce maturity and stability in our church family.**

Ephesians 4:11–14 (NLT), “Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. <sup>12</sup> Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. <sup>13</sup> This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. <sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won’t be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.

As we exercise our spiritual gifts the body progresses in maturity or completeness. As we exercise our spiritual gifts, we are able to discern truth from error, strengthening our roots in God’s Word so that we don’t follow lies and false doctrine.

Notice there are different roles for the Pastors and congregation.

**The role of the Pastors is to equip the body.** The word equip means to “bring someone to completion.” It is our job to help you progress in the Christian life. We disciple you and you do your role.

**The role of the body is to do the work of the ministry.** As you are equipped, you pass on what you learn. You disciple others. You serve and impact others inside and outside the church.

Pastors are also called to impact those inside and outside the church. But Pastors are not called to do all the work.

We are blessed to be a church that believes and lives out these distinctions. There are churches that treat their Pastors as hired hands. We hired you, now go do the ministry.

Sadly, these churches don't understand the roles laid out in the Bible. Their perspective is actually hurting the church.

The Pastor, no matter how gifted he might be, does not have all the spiritual gifts. So he will inevitably be serving in areas where he is not gifted because the church is not using their gifts.

The wise decision is to place the Pastor in the areas of his gifting and let him help equip the body to exercise their spiritual gifts so that the body will flourish. As I noted earlier, we all can be part of the vision with our personal impact plan. Together, we can build each other up so that we can all become disciple-makers.

Paul begins chapter 13 with highlighting some of the Corinthians most cherished spiritual gifts. Tongues, prophesy, knowledge, faith and so on were highly esteemed and were being abused. They were being used for selfish reasons.

In the first three verses, Paul placed himself in several hypothetical situations using these esteemed gifts to make a convicting point.

**Without love, it is meaningless to use my spiritual gifts.**

Look at verse 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." To use a spiritual gift like tongues with selfish reasons- without love is like a gong or cymbal. It is just a loud, obnoxious noise without a melody.

The motive of love makes the gift beneficial for others. Paul demonstrated personally that love was more important than just exercising his spiritual gift. He wrote, "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. <sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to **instruct others**, than ten thousand words in a tongue." 1 Corinthians 14:18–19 (ESV),

Paul adds another hypothetical situation. Verse 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.”

The Corinthians were judging one another by what gift they had. To them it was a sign of spirituality. Those who were able to prophesy about the future, have great understanding, or powerful faith were the spiritually mature- the spiritual elite.

What spiritual gift(s) you have does not determine your spiritual maturity. It is the Spirit who decides which gift you receive. 1 Corinthians 12:11 (NLT), “It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.” Gifts are **given by grace not by merit**.

To exercise your spiritual gifts without the motive of love, Paul says, “I am nothing.” Exercising your gifts without love cheapens both you and those who are touched by it. Selfish use puffs up, creates division and disunity. But exercising your gifts with love unifies and enriches the whole church.

The main test of spiritual maturity is not what spiritual gift you have. The main test is if you are growing in love. Warren Wiersbe wrote, “The main evidence of maturity in the Christian life is a growing love for God and for God’s people, as well as a love for lost souls.”

Everything that Jesus does is out of love. He never exercises His power or knowledge without love. In love, He rescued us through His death on the cross. In love, He brought us into His body the Church. In love, we are given spiritual gifts to be used in love to build up His Church.

The third hypothetical situation is verse 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.” Even amazing things like giving all your material wealth away and be tortured or martyred can be done without love.

A place like the Referral Center in DWT would greatly appreciate the donations. However, from God's perspective, lacking love as your main motivation in these acts gains you nothing. It doesn't impress God.

Why isn't God impressed? It has to do with who He is. He is love. It is what motivates everything He does. It is what is to motivate everything we do.

Just like in Jesus' day, love was misunderstood. What is love? Tina Turner, back in 1984 sang a very popular song, "What's Love Got to Do With it?" She called love, "A second-hand emotion."

Hollywood, lives like love is an emotion. Get married and stay married until you "Fall out of love." When the feelings are gone then love is gone. But is that biblical love? Is that the way God loves? Thank God it is not how He loves.

The Corinthians were failing in love and they needed a refresher course. So Paul wrote vv. 4-7 to describe,

**What love looks like.**

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

We are not going to spend a lot of time this morning going over the different aspects of love here as Pastor Scott preached on this part on Mother's Day. You can watch or hear it on our website.

Paul is bringing out the qualities of love that the Corinthians desperately needed. "Love is patient and kind." Love patiently waits to eat the food and drink of the agape feast until everyone is there. Love is kind and looks out for the less fortunate in the church.

Love does not envy- envy other people's positions in the church or their gifting. Love does not boast about one's position or spiritual gifting.

You can take the rest of these statements about love and remember the struggles in the Corinthian church. If they had love like what is listed here, would there have been division in the church? Would there have been, "I am of Paul. I am of Apollos." Would there have been selfishness and impatience? Would they have taken one another to court? Would they had proudly exercised their Christian liberties at the expense of a weaker brother or sister's conscience? No. They failed to love their brothers and sisters well.

Looking at the descriptions in verses 4-7, how well do you love others? More specifically, how well do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ? Even more specifically, how well do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ in this congregation?

The descriptions of love that Paul listed is not exhaustive. You could add more. Let's use our context in describing love.

Love is seeking to meet the needs of a brother or sister in Christ. Love is choosing to use your gifts for the benefit of others at Cornerstone. Love is welcoming and caring for those who walk into our church. Love is being uncomfortable in order to make another comfortable. Love is not just attending church; love is giving back. Love is inviting others to join you. Love is sharing the good news with family, co-workers, neighbors, and those God places in your path.

How are you doing with these descriptions of love?

Love is what we are called to do. Love best demonstrates that we are Christ's disciples. Love is more important than spiritual gifts. Paul clarifies that even more by stating that:

### **Spiritual gifts are temporary.**

Verse 8, “Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. <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 gave up childish ways. <sup>12</sup> 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.”

Spiritual gifts have a shelf life. One day they will pass away because they will no longer be needed. Review: what is the purpose of spiritual gifts? To build one another up until we are mature or complete and stable- unwavering. When will we ultimately become mature or complete and unwavering? When we meet up with Christ, either in death or when He returns.

For example, Paul brings up prophecies. Prophecies pronounce things that are to occur in the future. When Christ comes, prophecies will no longer be needed because the future will be realized.

Right now, no one has a complete picture of God or the future even with the gift of prophesy. Paul says “We know in part and we prophesy in part.”

In verse 12, Paul uses the analogy of a mirror. Brass mirrors were prevalent in Corinth. In a brass mirror you can see yourself but it is just a partial representation of the true self.

It’s like a selfie. It is a representation of you but it is not fully the real you.

One day, spiritual gifts will cease because all believers in Christ will see in full and will be perfect. This is a great thought to think about. If you know Jesus as your Savior and Lord, perfection is your future. No more sinful thoughts. No more sinful words. No

more sinful actions. Second to seeing Jesus, this is what I am most looking forward to experiencing.

Spiritual gifts are not the end all like the Corinthians believed. They are temporal. They are second to love for unlike the gifts,

### **Love never ends.**

Verse 8 again, "Love never ends." Verse 13, "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Faith is going to be different in heaven. Hebrews 11:1 (NLT), "Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see." In heaven we will see Jesus face-to-face. It will not require the kind of faith we need here because He is right there.

And hope will be different in heaven. Romans 8:24 (ESV), "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?"

Hope longs for something that has yet to occur. Hope for the light at the end of the tunnel when suffering. Hope for a new body because your present body is wasting away. Hope for the Lord to return. Once Christ returns and we are with Him in the new heavens and new earth, **hope will be fulfilled.**

Love is the greatest. Love never ends. It is eternal. Love will be the main character quality exhibited in Christians in heaven. We will finally be like Christ in perfect love.

That's exciting to think about isn't it? One day we will be perfect in love.

In the meantime, our major in the school of life is love. The Spirit's love manifested through us to each other inside the church and outside to the lost world around us.

Class is about to end. Your homework is to love. “Love your neighbor as yourself... Love one another as I have loved you.” How can you or I love like Christ right now? By surrendering ourselves to His Spirit. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control.”

Allow His love to permeate through your life.

Let's pray

o.b.g.