

## SPECIAL MESSAGES

### A PEOPLE OF LOVE

# 1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

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

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 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. 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.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

This past Thursday we celebrated Valentine's Day. My wife and I had a little family conference. We are empty nesters now, so it's really easy to have those conferences. We said, "Do we want to go out for Valentine's Day? It's going to be so crowded in the restaurants on Thursday. Let's move Valentine's Day back a day to Friday. We'll go out Friday night and we'll have a nice dinner." We picked a restaurant. We planned the evening and thought we'd go to a movie afterward.

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Then Friday came and we were like, “Do we really want to go out? It’s so difficult.” I said, “Sweetheart, why don’t I go get food and bring it in?” She said, “Oh, that’s a great idea.” But then it just seemed so hard to go out and get the food. She was like, “I’m going to make a home-made pizza.” This Valentine’s Day is getting better and better and better! So we made a pizza. The theater is way too far, so we got Netflix going. Here’s the great accomplishment: We watched the entire movie. Did not go to bed early. Stayed up and watched the whole movie! Yeah. I feel like that’s a great accomplishment.

Valentine’s Day is an opportunity to celebrate romantic love. Think of this passage. We hear it most often at weddings. We expect people to be all dressed up and we are ready to observe someone taking vows together. That’s not really the context of the passage.

It’s certainly appropriate for weddings. There’s nothing wrong with it. I’ve preached on it a number of times in weddings. But very seldom do I preach on this passage for the church community and beyond, and I want to do that today. I want to do it, not just in light of the fact that Valentine’s Day just happened. But also because for us in this community, that day represents something else, doesn’t it?

One year ago, 17 precious people lost their lives in a murderous event that was a defining moment for us as a community. At 10:15 on Thursday, like many of you, I took part in a moment of silence, remembering their lives and grieving with the families who are grieving their loss.

In light of these events, for our community and Valentine’s Day -- two very different happenings -- I want to draw our attention to the love that is described in 1 Corinthians 13. Because the reality is, the love that we think about for Valentine’s Day, the eros, the romantic love needs to be built on the love of God that’s described in this chapter.

In fact, when I have an opportunity to help couples in marriage, whether they are already married or getting ready to get married, the thing I want to impart the most if they are followers of Christ is: I just want you to be Christians to one another. Listen, act like you’re a believer in Christ. Treat one another with the love of Jesus and you are on your way to a great marriage.

We need more than the picture of love that the world gives us, the kind of romantic love that conquers all, which is wonderful. This is not an anti-romantic message at all. I’m just calling us to stop and consider this incredible love.

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Just to connect today to last week, last week I preached a message where we talked about how helping people understand who Christ is, is the loving thing to do. When we live out our faith in a way where we are not sensitive to the confusion that other people have, or their misunderstandings about who Christ is, and about what we believe and about the truth, that's an unloving thing to do. It pushes people away from God. Paul says in the next chapter, 1 Corinthians 14, that it pushes them literally toward judgment.

When people bring us these tough questions: "You believe this? And what about this? And this doesn't make sense," we don't want to just give them the truth. We want to give them the truth in a way where we get into their lives and try to understand the question. We grapple with it honestly, in a loving way.

I've never quite done this before, but I'm preaching my way through 1 Corinthians backwards. We come to this incredible chapter where Paul gives us one of the most eloquent descriptions of the love of God. Really, what he's describing here is a heart, a life that's been transformed by the love of Jesus Christ. This is a supernaturally changed life. I'm going to give it to you in three parts, three paragraphs. They are:

1. The importance of love (first paragraph).
2. The nature of love (second paragraph).
3. The permanence of love (third paragraph).

Let's jump in.

1. The importance of love.

This is an eloquent description where Paul is talking to a group of people -- they are all about the gifts. They are all about power. They are terribly, terribly impressed with being gifted.

I was with a church leader recently. He was kind of a leader of leaders. He said, "Brian, in our movement, all we care about is gifted communicators. We just look for gifted communicators. That's all that matters." I was really concerned to hear that. I thought, "You're doing the opposite of this passage."

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In fact, Paul would never say that. When Paul taught his sons in the Lord, Timothy and Titus, how to choose leaders, he talked about character over and over and over again. Most of what he had to say then was: What you really want in a leader is someone who is filled with the love of Jesus Christ, and their character has been molded and shaped.

Yes, we want gifted people. We are not against that. But Paul is actually saying here that no matter how gifted you are, if you don't have love it means nothing to God. From our standpoint this is really difficult for us to get ahold of. You may practically be helping people with your gifts, but in terms of you and God, it means nothing. They were all about these amazing speaking gifts of eloquence. They had even come to associate their spiritual gifts, tongues and prophecy, with the language of angels. They saw themselves as a super-spiritual group because of the powerful gifts that were at work in their lives.

You know what? Paul never says that those gifts were fake or false. They were genuine spiritual gifts, but they were using them in a way that was unloving. It's a very important lesson for us. We talk about it a lot here at Riverside. We see this. We see this every day in our world. People who can do amazing things – we are so impressed with them that we kind of give them a pass on character. It's not a biblical message.

In fact, Paul says it's not enough to just do these things motivated by love. He says it in a strange way that's part of the poetry of the passage: Do you have love? Are you walking in the way of love? Have you been transformed by the love of God in your life? Really, that's what becomes apparent here in this passage. You can only love as this is described when you experience the love of God. And that love comes in and transforms and renews.

Let me ask, if Riverside is your home, what are we known for? What do we want to be known for? It's very interesting. There are a lot of ways that we could build this case, but whenever Paul writes a letter, he begins typically by thanking God for the people he's writing to. I want to give you a few examples.

In Ephesians 1:15 he is writing to the Ephesian Christians. "For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints..." he goes on to say, "...I give thanks for you." Look at the two things: faith and love. In a sense, Paul is saying, "This is what I'm grateful for in your life." But by the very fact that he's drawing attention to that, he's saying to them: This is what I want you to be known for: Your faith in Christ and your love.

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Colossians 1:4-5: "... since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel..." What does he say? Three things: "Faith, hope, and love. This is what I'm grateful for. This is what I want you to be known for." And he makes a connection here. He says all of this comes from the gospel, the message of the Bible. If this is your first time in a church service like this, the message of the Bible we summarize in one word is the gospel. It's good news. It's not what you do for God, it's what God does for you.

God made the world, but something is terribly wrong. We are in a broken relationship with God. Why do these terrible things happen? Even beyond those that are intentional, that are so harmful – disease and affliction and suffering of all sorts -- it all stems from this broken relationship with God. That doesn't sound like good news, but the good news is that God takes it upon himself to redeem, to make new, to restore.

So, in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, all sin is paid for, for all who believe in Christ are forgiven. Your sin is paid for and your relationship with God is restored. That is the gospel. It's called grace. It's a gift. You receive it; you don't earn it.

Faith, hope and love flow from this message. I put my faith in Christ. I trust in God. I'm not trusting in my own goodness, my own works, my own ability. My trust, my faith, my confidence is in God and in what he has done for me in Jesus Christ. I have hope as a result. I have hope for all of eternity, that in this life and in the life to come, my relationship with God is restored and I am without guilt before him. I've been transformed by the love of Christ, and that's how I want to live. I want to live with a heart full of love for God and love for other people.

If you go out into this foyer, you see our values up on a board. #1 and #2: Love God. Love people. We really mean that. We want to teach on, pray for, equip, challenge, and live out a life of love for other people. We do it very imperfectly, but we want to grow in the love of God as we experience it in terms of loving other people.

Another example – 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, verses 2 and 3: "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." We could just go on and on with these examples.

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Last scripture reference here, just to bring this home. Jesus himself taught us this is what we are to be known for. John 13:34-35: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

It’s pretty clear, isn’t it? We are to love one another the way Jesus loves us. Here is God’s strategy for reaching a world that doesn’t know him. That is a drop the mic moment. I cannot tell you as a pastor how many meetings I go to where I hear strategy after strategy after strategy after strategy about how to reach a world that doesn’t know God, and he gives us the strategy.

When Johnny and Carly came to Riverside to work with students, Adam Pizarro came and said, “Hey, I found someone. I think they’re supposed to be here! I think we should hire them!” I was like, “Hire them? I don’t even know them!” Then Jesse came and said, “Hey, I met this couple and I think God is doing something here. I met them and was so blessed to hear they’ve already talked with their pastor. I called their pastor, because we are not in competition with Victory Life Church. We are a part of the same family!

If you are not a follower of Jesus Christ yet (I’ll just throw that “yet” in there, being hopeful) and you’ve seen Christians competing and fighting and bickering, I am so sorry. Please forgive us. We have failed you in that moment and we’ve disobeyed Christ. It’s pretty clear, right?

Okay, back to our points. The importance of love. Second paragraph:

### 2. The nature of love.

I am deliberately trying not to parse out every word, because the beauty and the impact of this passage just flows over us. I think in this particular description of love, of the 15 verbs, the first two are positive. Love is patient. The King James gets it: longsuffering. I always think it’s funny that we read this at weddings. Okay, get ready – Love one another. Longsuffering, right? This is what marital bliss looks like.

Love is patient. Love is kind. Then what follows are eight negatives, eight things love is not. It’s not rude. It’s not arrogant. It’s not prideful. It’s not self-centered. It’s this whole description. He gets down to the last one and he counterbalances that with an opposite. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

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Then he ends with these four “all things.” Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Those “all things” I think describe human relationships. We are charitable in our love for one another. We think the best of others. We expect the best. We hope for the best. It’s not this kind of naïve optimism. We are realistic, but we are not pronouncing uncharitable judgments on people all the time.

I always tell this little story when I want to make this point. I know many of you have heard it. My little girl was playing soccer -- she was a star. She was, in my opinion, by far the best on the field. Sorry, Adam’s wife was at times on the field. But she wasn’t on the field this time. Man, I just get in so much trouble without even trying.

It was the conference game and it was a big deal. She gets put on the bench and I’m like, “Why is she not playing?” Then she gets put in the game near the end and scores the only goal. At the end of the game I’m mad at the coach. I’m going to give this coach a piece of my mind. The coach sees me coming and she knows what’s coming. She’s like “Your daughter is sick. She doesn’t feel well. She asked to be taken out of the game.” She was immediately defending herself before I said anything.

It’s an example of how I described a motivation and a decision that was completely off, and I did it with just a little bit of knowledge. Paul is describing here a different way of relating, in humility, believing God to be at work. Believing all things, bearing all things, hoping all things. It’s a different way of relating.

He ends with the permanence of love.

### 3. The permanence of love.

He talks about how a lot of the things, most of the things that we put great value on are going to pass away. But love is going to remain. It’s in a different category. In fact, he ends by saying faith, hope and love remain.

In one sense, faith and hope will change, sort of pass away. They will be fulfilled. One day we will walk by sight, not by faith, and our hope will be fulfilled. But he is saying something there in that last verse. When he says faith, hope and love remain, he is saying, “Friends, this is the message of

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the Bible. This is the gospel!” It’s in a different category than being gifted or good or making sacrifices or the appearance of something.

In our humanity we are all caught up in what other people think about us and how we appear. When we get into a fight with our spouse, we are ready to just lay out a roll call of all the sacrifices we’ve made. I made the bed! Right? I did the dishes! Right? There are massive sacrifices that we make. Paul says all this stuff – if you don’t have love...

This is where I want to end. In this amazing, beautiful song, love is personified. That’s part of why it’s so beautiful to us. He is talking about not having love. He’s describing more than a motivation, more than a gift, more than a thing you have. I think it’s because the message of the Bible is that love is a person. The love he’s describing here is Jesus Christ. He is really saying to us: Receive the love of Jesus. Just receive it. Don’t earn it. You can’t. Receive it. And that brings a supernatural change in your heart and a growth that comes. I want you to walk in this way. I want you to treat other people the way Jesus has treated you. This is a beautiful call of God for our lives.

In many ways, Riverside, you do this well. I think it’s a godly thing to say I’m proud of this community. You are living this out. I could reference some specific areas where I think you’ve walked this out well. We know we have a long way to go, and we know, also, that the pain and the brokenness and the lostness of our world needs a supernatural love. But I want to call us to it. I’m in faith for it.

I’d like to conclude by asking you to reflect for a moment. Bow your head. I’m not going to call for a response, but I want us to stop to consider what we are known for individually, what we’re known for as a married couple, or our friend community, our group of singles, our families, as a local church, as the Church in South Florida, and realize you can’t work this up. There is a healing, a renewal that comes as you receive the love of Christ.