

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY

1 Corinthians 12:31b – 13:13

This is a hard passage of Scripture and a hard topic to preach on. Not because what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 is controversial or difficult to understand, but because it is so familiar. What can I possibly say to you about love that hasn't been said before? What can I say that most of you, if not all of you, haven't heard before? After all, thousands – even millions – of sermons have been preached on love, not to mention a plethora of poems, songs and books which have some aspect of love as their theme.

Our culture, in fact, is obsessed with love. But obsession does not necessarily equate with understanding. Unfortunately, the word “love” is used in so many ways – it has been so used and misused, so abused and misunderstood – that a lot of people in our culture are confused about what love really is.

People here in Washington love the Redskins. We love our Starbucks. We love pizza. We say: “I love to sing” or “I love golf” or “I love to knit” or “I love to fish.” We talk about our love of the mountains or the beach. Then we use the same word to describe our affection for our family. But surely my love for my wife and my kids is qualitatively different from my love for a football team or my favorite coffee. And what about my love for the Lord Jesus? What about God's love for you and me? What is love, anyway?

The entertainment culture in our country relentlessly promotes the idea that love is all about sex. That is the perspective that dominates so much of today's TV, movies and music. A lot of Americans, including many Christians, have bought into it, because Hollywood and other media make it look so good, so appealing, so right. A lot of people in our society have come to think of love as something you make in a moment of passion, apart from the enduring commitment of marriage.

Is that what love is?

Some people believe love is simply a feeling over which you have no control. It just happens. Sometimes Cupid's arrow strikes when and where we least expect it. People talk of “falling in love” and “falling out of love” as if we're at the mercy of an irresistible force outside us and there is nothing we can do about it. A man and a woman will promise to stay together as long as the feeling of being in love remains. But when the feeling goes, all bets are off. It is time to say good-bye and move on to someone new.

Is that really what love is?

Because there is so much misinformation, so much misunderstanding and confusion about the meaning of love, it becomes all the more important for us to think together about it and to examine what God's Word says about it, even if it is just to remind

ourselves of what we already know, so that we will understand it clearly and live a life of love that is pleasing to God.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

The Bible is relentless in talking about love. Not just God's love for us, but our mandate to communicate and demonstrate God's love, to reflect it and incarnate it in all our relationships.

Think, for example, of what Jesus said to His disciples in John 13:34, words He spoke to them on the night before He went to the cross in the ultimate expression of love: "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." In the same way that Jesus embodied love and put His love for us into action, so we are to love others with the same kind of love and put it into action. Because love, at its root, is not simply a feeling. It is an action word. It is something we do. And Jesus, in the very next verse (John 13:35), gives the world outside the church the right to judge the genuineness of our faith and commitment to Him on the basis of our love. He says: "This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other" (*The Message*). It is the main measuring stick by which our claim to be followers of Christ will be assessed.

It is not just Jesus who spotlights the primacy of love for one another, though it would be enough if that were the case. Other New Testament writers pick up the baton and run with it. Here is a sampling:

1 John 3:16-18: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue (only), but with actions and in truth."

Here is another way to say the same thing (from *The Message*):

"This is how we've come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed His life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear. My dear children, let's not just talk about love. Let's practice real love."

That is pretty clear, isn't it?

1 John 4:7, 9-11: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God... This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He

loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

Colossians 3:12-14 describes what we might call the “clothing” of a Christlike character:

“As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

The Message expresses the sense of these verses this way:

“So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you... And whatever else you put on, wear love. It is your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.”

It is, as it says in the *New Living Translation* (NLT), “what binds us all together in perfect harmony.”

Ephesians 5:1-2: “Be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Or, as it says in *The Message*:

“Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with Him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us. Love like that.”

Then, in the very next verse it says:

“Don’t allow love to turn into lust, setting off a downhill slide into sexual promiscuity, filthy practices, or bullying greed” (Ephesians 5:3, *The Message*).

That is not what love is like or where it leads. It is not a license to use or exploit another person for our own pleasure. That is a perversion of biblical love.

Here is our model of love: “Be imitators of God.” “Watch what God does, and then you do it.” “Keep company with Him and learn a life of love.” “Observe how Christ loved us... (and) love like that.”

Romans 12:9-10: “Love must be sincere... Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.”

The *New Living Translation* says:

“Don’t just pretend that you love others. Really love them.”

In *The Message* it says:

“Love from the center of who you are. Don’t fake it. Be good friends who love deeply. Practice playing second fiddle.”

Here is one more, from **1 Peter 1:22**: “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth (of the gospel) so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.”

Love one another deeply. From the heart. With a love that goes beyond words or thoughts or feelings to action. To a lifestyle of loving action that reflects God’s love for us.

THREE WORDS FOR LOVE

Paul expresses the primacy of love in a powerful way in 1 Corinthians 13. Among the things I can tell you today that many of you probably already know is that in the Greek language, which was the language of the New Testament and the “international” language of the 1st century Roman world, there were several different words for love, each one describing a different kind or highlighting a different aspect of love. The three words which are most significant for our understanding and for our lives as followers of Christ are these: *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*.

Eros

Eros is the word from which we get our English word “erotic.” It is the word for romantic passion, for passionate sexual desire, for sensual love.

Eros is not a bad thing. In fact, it is good, as long as it is expressed within the boundaries God has established for it. It is a gift from God. But its goodness can only be experienced and fully realized in the covenant of marriage according to the biblical pattern. When *eros* oversteps the boundaries God has established for it, when it goes outside the covenant of marriage in which a man and a woman commit themselves in love and fidelity to one another as long as they both shall live, it may feel good in the moment, but it is not good. It may taste sweet to your lips, but it will leave you with a severe case of moral and spiritual indigestion. And the heartache of emptiness to go along with the heartburn.

Within God’s boundaries, *eros* is good. But when it overflows the banks in which God has created it to flow, it can do incredible damage. Even when it stays within God’s boundaries, *eros* is not enough by itself. There has to be something more.

Philia

The second word is *philia*, which describes the warm love of friendship and family, the love that enjoys the company and shared interests of others. It is the word the Bible uses to describe the friendship of Jesus and Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead (John 11). It is the kind of love to which we are called in Hebrews 13:1: “Keep on loving each other as brothers.”

And in Romans 12:10: “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”

This kind of love is a blessing from God. If you are rich in family or friends or both, you are truly rich. *Philia* is something for which we should be continuously grateful in our lives. But it is not the highest form of love.

Agape

The third New Testament word for love is the word *agape*. Outside the Bible it is a word rarely used in classical Greek, but in the New Testament – in the teaching of Jesus and in the letters of the New Testament writers, especially Paul and John – it becomes the most powerful word for love you can imagine.

Agape is the word Paul uses here in 1 Corinthians 13 to describe love. This kind of love is not dependent on the actions or reactions of others. It is not rooted in our feelings and it is not dependent on them, even though sometimes it will move us to feel very deeply. But while feelings come and go, while feelings are as changeable as the weather (or more so), this kind of love endures, because it is rooted not in our ever-changing emotions but in a commitment of the will which says: “I love you no matter what. And I will keep on loving you.”

This kind of love is not conditional love. There are no requirements you have to fulfill in order to qualify for it. It does not say: “If you do this, if you live up to my expectations, then I will love you.” It does not say: “When you prove yourself worthy, when you show me that you are good enough, then I will love you.” *Agape* love is not “if” or “when” love, it is “no matter what” love.

This is the kind of love Paul describes so magnificently in 1 Corinthians 13. It is the kind of love we see perfectly embodied in the person and work of Jesus. It is the kind of love with which you and I are loved by God Himself. And it is the kind of love with which we are to love one another.

THE PRIMACY OF LOVE

In the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul makes a powerful argument for the primacy or pre-eminence of love. To feel the full weight of what he is saying there, we need to have a good handle on the context.

Paul's *magnum opus* on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is sandwiched between 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 where, in both of these chapters, Paul is talking not about the chief fruit of the Spirit (which is love), but about the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their operation in the church's life. What he says is that love – the fruit of the Spirit – is more important than spiritual giftedness. He does not say that spiritual gifts or their exercise are unimportant. He does not say that we should minimize or disparage or neglect or hide our gifts. On the contrary, he says clearly that we should desire spiritual gifts (12:31; 14:1), that we should pursue them and develop them and use them. But love, he says, is more important than all the gifts in the world. *Agape* love, he says, is “the most excellent way” (12:31b).

The point of what Paul is saying is summarized in *The Message's* rendering of 1 Corinthians 13:3, which says: “No matter what I say, no matter what I believe, no matter what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.”

Bankrupt. With a net worth of zero. Or less than zero.

To illustrate the point, here is a simple exercise I've shared with some of you before. It is something you can do right now, with a pen or pencil and your sermon notes page. Write out a string of zeros – 6 of them, 10, 15, 20 or a gazillion of them – as many as you want. Then look at the result. No matter how many zeros you have, the number on your paper has no value. It adds up to zero.

But now, put a real number in front of all those zeros – a 1 or 2 or any other number, maybe 17 (for Redskins' quarterback Jason Campbell) or 82 (for Antwan Randel-El) – and suddenly you have a number of great value.

Do you see where this is going? Love is the “number” that gives all your gifts and abilities and talents their value. If love is missing, it doesn't matter how gifted you are or how many talents you have. Without love, Paul is saying, all you have is a bunch of zeros. All the zeros in the world added together still equal zero.

Or, to put it in an equation: Gifts minus love equals zero. Life minus love equals zero.

That is how much love matters. Without it, you and I are bankrupt, no matter how wealthy or gifted we may be.

WHAT LOVE IS LIKE

In verses 4-7 Paul turns to the question of what this kind of love is like. What are the qualities of *agape* love? We shouldn't take this as an exhaustive description, but here Paul gives us a picture of what love is and is not, what it does and does not do. Love, he says, is patient and kind. It is patient with people who are hard to love. It reacts with kindness and grace to those who rub us the wrong way.

Here is an important thing to recognize: Not everybody is easy to love. Some people are hard to love. We all have what Philip Keller calls “porcupine people” in our lives who

are hard to love – or even to like. People we would rather not get too close to. Prickly people.

Some people are much easier to love than others. It is much easier to love people who love you, isn't it? But remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:46-47: "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors (the most despised members of society) doing that? If you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans (people who do not know God or worship Him) do that?"

In other words, what's the big deal about being nice to people who are nice to you? What's so hard about loving people who love you? Anybody can do that. The test is how we treat those who are hard to love, who rub us the wrong way.

Love is patient. A husband and wife were on their way home from church one Sunday. The wife said: "Wasn't that a great sermon on patience?"

To which her husband replied: "Yeah, but he went five minutes too long."

Love is patient and kind. It is slow to become irritable or annoyed. It is not short-tempered. It puts up with idiosyncrasies, recognizing that we've all got them. Or, as John Ortberg says in his book *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, we're all "slightly irregular." In one way or another, everybody's weird. I am. Love understands that. So it treats others with patience and kindness.

Further, says Paul, love is not rude or proud or self-seeking. It doesn't say: "Look at me!" It doesn't say: "Get out of my way!" It doesn't insist on its own way. It is not about me and what I want. It means that we don't just look out for our own interests, but for the needs and interests and desires of others (Philippians 2:4).

Love doesn't get angry easily. It doesn't fly off the handle. It is not irritable or touchy. It doesn't look for reasons (or excuses) to become angry.

I don't know how it is for you, but I know I can be irritable at times. I *am* irritable at times. In fact, given the right set of circumstances, I can be easily irritated. When I'm like that, I'm not exhibiting the fruit of love in my life. Love is not irritable or easily angered.

Paul also says that love does not envy, it does not boast, and it does not take pleasure in the problems or troubles or misfortunes of others. It does not resent the blessings and successes of others, but (as Paul says in Romans 12:15) rejoices with those who rejoice.

Notice also that love does not keep track of hurts or of the sins of others. To hold a grudge or keep a running score of wrongs violates the nature of love, because love covers and forgives the faults of others rather than delighting in them or exploiting them (1 Peter 4:8; Ephesians 4:32). This does not mean that we should sweep problems under the rug,

or allow others to continue in behaviors that are destructive to themselves or others and dishonor God.

Agape love is not afraid to face the truth and deal with it. In fact, Paul says, it takes pleasure in the triumph of the truth, because ultimately it is the truth – the truth proclaimed by Christ and embodied in His life – that sets people free.

What does love do? It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (13:7). Always.

Other translations, such as the *New King James Version*, render verse 7 this way: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

It does not give up. It does not quit believing in God and the power of His love. It does not quit hoping for the best. Nor does it rush to judgment without hearing all the facts. It does not give up, because it understands that with God there is no such thing as a hopeless cause.

CONCLUSION

I don’t think I’ve said anything new today. I probably have not said anything you haven’t heard before. Still, it is good to be reminded from time to time of what we already know so that we can be intentional about acting on it. Love is not an optional add-on to the Christian life. It is at the center of the kind of life God wants us to live. The challenge for each of us is to translate what we know in our heads and even feel in our hearts into concrete and God-honoring action every day of our lives. As Jesus said in John 13:17: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

After he concludes his *magnum opus* on love at the end of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says in his very next breath – in the opening words of chapter 14 – as if to punctuate the significance of love so that we cannot possibly miss it: “Go after a life of love as if your life depended on it – because it does” (14:1a, *The Message*).

May it be so in us. May it be true in my life and yours. In all our relationships. To the praise and glory of God. Amen.