

Love Is The Better Way

Ash Wednesday

Peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 13 is often referred to as the “love chapter”. You hear it a lot at weddings. While that can work...weddings aren’t where it was originally aimed. It was aimed at the church – a church in the city of Corinth. A Church that was loaded with problems.

Corinth was like Las Vegas on steroids. I have a friend who served as pastor in Vegas, and he told me about the dark, destructive influence the city had on the people who came to that Lutheran church. Corinth had that going “in spades.”

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But Paul felt the promise and power of the Gospel could rise over any evil. We wonder why Paul would want to plant a church in a city that bad. But Paul believed where there is evil going on, that’s all the more reason to have a church there. Paul didn’t want a church to be among people who were so good and full of faith that it was like a church at the gates of heaven. No, Paul believed in putting a church right at the gates of hell. He wanted to attack the powers of evil. He believed a church should be where hurting, broken, imperfect people are. I would hope you would believe the same too. What good is a doctor who only has patients who are well? A doc should spend his or her time and energy on curing the sick. And a church – like this one – like St. Paul – is to focus on people who are far from God, and trouble, and imperfect, -- people who bring their problems and need Jesus to heal them.

Paul wrote this in Romans 5:20 ***“But as people sinned more and more, God’s wonderful grace became more abundant.”***

That's important, because when people hear this Good news about God and His love for the first time, when they come to faith, it doesn't mean they leave all their problems behind when they become part of a church family. They often still bring their old, familiar habits and addictions with them. I can tell you that from starting a mission church. When people first meet Jesus Christ and believe in Him, people still are who they are. It takes them time for God to sift through all their baggage and turn them into who He wants them to become as followers fully committed to Jesus.

So, the church at Corinth was filled with struggles. It was filled with people who were just beginning to have their lifestyles changed by Jesus. It was filled with misconceptions about Jesus. Divisions among the people were rampant. It was filled with struggles about following different preachers. They had struggles about how to worship. They had struggles about ethical issues, marriage issues, they were divided even on Jesus' resurrection.

So, Paul sits down and he writes a letter to these people. For 12 chapters Paul is correcting all these problems and issues. And after 12 long chapters, I see Paul just about completely exasperated. It's like he's saying to them, "People, you got to understand that what you are doing is not working!" "I'm going to show you a better way. A way that's better to live. And a better way to measure your own life.

Question for you: How do you measure your life? How do you measure the value of the things that you have done or accomplished?

I can tell you how the world measures your value, measures your accomplishments. They do it in 2 ways. The 1st way is by • **how much money you make.** We even talk in monetary terms of how much a person is worth. You will hear people say, "That guy over there, he's got to be worth a million bucks," or "She's worth \$100 million." We attach worth to that. According to this measurement, the more money you make decides how important you are. That is a skewed way to put value on a life. Under this system we place higher value on people who play sports, than we

do on teachers, or social workers, or military and 1st responders, or even parents who stays home and sacrifices a career in order to raise their children. That's just wrong.

The 2nd way the world gives value to a life is it measures • **Your status.** A CEO, Judge, Top Salesman...and the like - they have status. The captain of the cheerleading squad or the quarterback on the high school football team is popular and has that status. A small-town mayor may not pull down a huge salary but would still have high status in his or her community... big fish, small pond.

Corinth was a place where the flashiest, the biggest, the boldest, the newest, the most outrageous, the top of the line – that's what was valued the most. That's what people held up high and sought after. And Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 13, "I want to show you a better way."

Paul said to those people, and he is saying to you and me tonight, the ultimate **measure of life, is love.** Love is the true measure of all that we say, all that we have, all that we do. Without love even our best accomplishments are nothing in God's eyes.

To illustrate what he means, Paul takes the measurement of love and applies it to people we would naturally hold in high esteem. This is the first one:

1. You cannot measure the value of your words by the impressiveness of your speech.

Look at verse this verse, **1 Corinthians 13:1** ***"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."***

Bible experts are divided over what this verse means when Paul talks here about **"speaking in the tongues of men and of angels."** Some point out that this was a common way to refer to an exceptional speaker. Without TV or radio, there were men who earned a living by going from city to city and giving speeches. A person who spoke in the "tongues of men and of angels" spoke with great eloquence and style. They could persuade people and move them.

Other Bible experts point out that this verse takes place in the context of a discussion on spiritual gifts and especially the gift of speaking in tongues – in different unknown languages. Therefore, they feel it must refer to the gift of speaking in tongues. Either interpretation is possible. The Corinthians actually struggled with both issues, and I think it highly probable that Paul intended both meanings to be picked up by the Corinthians.

But Paul makes it clear that an exceptional presentation by a silver-tongued speaker, that is empty of any true Christian love is just meaningless noise. And if you aren't careful, this noise can actually lead you away from God's truth.

These days there are preachers on TV that are amazingly gifted, slick, preachers. They can hold attention. They can make an audience weep and make an audience laugh. But in spite of how good they may speak, if they don't have God-defined love – God's kind of love – then that is just noise, it is false teaching that can be dangerous because it can lead people astray.

2. You cannot measure your spiritual maturity by the extent of your gifts.

Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 13:2** ***"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."***

Spiritual gifts are God's idea. He gives them as He sees fit. The gifts are essential for building each other up and functioning as the church of Jesus Christ. A person's spiritual gift-ability compliments another Christian's gift-ability. The gifts are good in themselves. God does not give bad gifts. And so the problem is not with spiritual gifts but with the misuse of spiritual gifts, with the misunderstanding of spiritual gifts, and with an improper emphasis on some gifts to the exclusion of others. Paul mentions three spiritual gifts in this verse:

First, the gift of prophecy. The spiritual gift of prophecy is the Holy Spirit-given ability to take God's Word and explain it to people so that it makes a huge difference in their life. The gift of

prophecy is speaking God's Will so people understand it. Paul points to this gift of – prophecy, and says “If I have this gift, but don't have love, I am just making noise.”

Next Paul mentions the gift of knowledge. The spiritual gift of knowledge is the Holy Spirit-given ability to have understanding or insight into the mysteries of God. We live in awe of extremely knowledgeable people. If you know someone who is super smart, don't you sometimes just go, “Wow! That person sure is brilliant.” I have one friend who I used to be able to meet once in a while for lunch. I really looked forward to just listening to him, because he saw the world in ways I never could have, and he would put things together that I never would have thought about. Just a smart, smart guy!

Paul speaks of the gift of knowledge here. and he exaggerates, like, “Imagine if you could understand all mysteries.” That would be amazing. Wouldn't you like to be able to understand all mysteries? To understand the inner workings of atoms and galaxies, to understand how light can be both a particle and a waveform at the same time, to find the cure for cancer? To be able to explain the Trinity, and Free Will, the end times, to know all the mysteries of Scripture? To explain how bumblebees fly. (You know, bumblebees don't fly – that is scientifically, they can't. It's a mass to wing size ratio thing. Scientifically it shouldn't work that bumblebees can fly, but someone forgot to tell the bees they can't fly, so they went ahead and did it anyway.)

Paul is saying, you got to be careful. He says if you were omniscient, even if you knew everything that God knew, if you did not have love, you would be worthless chatter.

And you know those folks who impress us because they have such a great amount of faith. These are the people who just exude faith. They live by faith. You admire them and say, “Man, I wish I had a faith like ... (so-and-so ...). The spiritual gift of faith is the Holy Spirit-given ability to trust God for impossible things. Paul speaks of a great faith here – a powerful faith that can move mountains. But Paul says, even if I have that kind of faith, but

without love, it's just useless.

This is powerful stuff! To a city of people that lived on shine, and on the biggest and best, to then hear that the biggest and best isn't really the end-all, be-all?!

Paul goes on to show them that without love even our best accomplishments are nothing in God's eyes. He makes this 3rd point: **You cannot measure the size of your reward by the depth of your sacrifice.** (again ←)

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:3, ***"If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."***

Money has such a grip on us that some people find it very hard to part with money. Money has a grip on their souls, and the more they make, the harder it is to give. And so, don't we look up to people who are generous? Don't we honor them? We give them status if even only in our mind. So, imagine if someone were to give this church 2 million bucks to build a new family-life outreach center to be used to serve the community and share Jesus, we tend to honor those folks, and we might put their name on the building. Right? Hospitals do this all the time.

So, Paul takes that kind of generosity, a generosity so great few of us can do that, and then he amps it up, he exaggerates it. Imagine if a person were so generous that they gave everything they had --- gave absolutely *everything* – they even went so far as they gave their life, and then even farther, gave their body up to be burned! That would be generosity way, way, way over the top. And if a person actually pulled that off, it would be amazing. BUT if they didn't have love – God's kind of love – all that giving would be just meaningless. Just junk!

You see, love, LOVE, is the only true measure of a life that God calls a success. LOVE is the only quality that truly matters when all else is said and done.

Love is better than all the glitz and glitter. Love is better than the newest, shiniest, and best. Love is better than amazing, smooth, convincing speech. Love is better than knowing

everything and understanding the deepest mysteries. Love is greater than super generosity that gives absolutely everything you got.

You see, friends, there is only ONE – only ONE person who did all that, AND loves. There is only ONE who has glitz that is filled with even heavenly glory. One whose words are so powerful that they can give you life, and hope, and faith, and heaven. There is only ONE who knows every mystery because He is the person who created it all, put it all together in the beginning. There is only ONE who has given everything, even gave His life, and surrendered His body to be crucified as a common criminal. This ONE is Jesus.

AND! AND! AND! Jesus is the ONE who is love. He is more than just an example of extreme love. He IS love!

And this One of Love, Jesus, is the One who made you, who forgives you, and who wants you to be His now and forevermore!

QUESTION FOR YOU ... Does love sound important?

So how many of us here think it would be important for us to know what this love – this love of Jesus – means? How important is it for every one of us know this amazing love of Christ, and how His love plays out in your life?

I have some great news for you. This is the first message in a series entitled, “Love is” On Sundays and Wednesdays, from today all the way through Maundy Thursday, we are going to dive into the “love chapter” of God’s Word. This season of Lent we are going to discover what love is, and how love shows in our lives.

So I have a great goal for you. A wonderful goal for all of us is to aim to not miss any of these messages, because love is what it’s all about in God’s eyes. Love is that important!

Amen.



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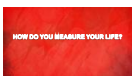
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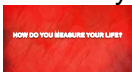


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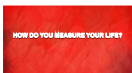
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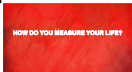
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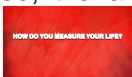
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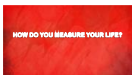
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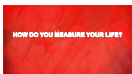
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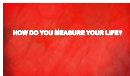
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AND! AND! AND! Jesus is the ONE who is love. He is more than just an example of extreme love. He IS love!

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I can tell you how the world measures your value, measures your accomplishments. They do it in 2 ways. The 1st way is by • **how much money you make.** We even talk in monetary terms of how much a person is worth. You will hear people say, "That guy over there, he's got to be worth a million bucks," or "She's worth \$100 million." We attach worth to that. According to this measurement, the more money you make decides how important you are. That is a skewed way to put value on a life. Under this system we place higher value on people who play sports, than we

do on teachers, or social workers, or military and 1st responders, or even parents who stays home and sacrifices a career in order to raise their children. That's just wrong.

The 2nd way the world gives value to a life is it measures • **Your status.** A CEO, Judge, Top Salesman...and the like - they have status. The captain of the cheerleading squad or the quarterback on the high school football team is popular and has that status. A small-town mayor may not pull down a huge salary but would still have high status in his or her community... big fish, small pond.

Corinth was a place where the flashiest, the biggest, the boldest, the newest, the most outrageous, the top of the line – that's what was valued the most. That's what people held up high and sought after. And Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 13, "I want to show you a better way."

Paul said to those people, and he is saying to you and me tonight, the ultimate **measure of life, is love.** Love is the true measure of all that we say, all that we have, all that we do. Without love even our best accomplishments are nothing in God's eyes.

To illustrate what he means, Paul takes the measurement of love and applies it to people we would naturally hold in high esteem. This is the first one:

1. You cannot measure the value of your words by the impressiveness of your speech.

Look at verse this verse, **1 Corinthians 13:1** ***"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."***

Bible experts are divided over what this verse means when Paul talks here about **"speaking in the tongues of men and of angels."** Some point out that this was a common way to refer to an exceptional speaker. Without TV or radio, there were men who earned a living by going from city to city and giving speeches. A person who spoke in the "tongues of men and of angels" spoke with great eloquence and style. They could persuade people and move them.

Other Bible experts point out that this verse takes place in the context of a discussion on spiritual gifts and especially the gift of speaking in tongues – in different unknown languages. Therefore, they feel it must refer to the gift of speaking in tongues. Either interpretation is possible. The Corinthians actually struggled with both issues, and I think it highly probable that Paul intended both meanings to be picked up by the Corinthians.

But Paul makes it clear that an exceptional presentation by a silver-tongued speaker, that is empty of any true Christian love is just meaningless noise. And if you aren't careful, this noise can actually lead you away from God's truth.

These days there are preachers on TV that are amazingly gifted, slick, preachers. They can hold attention. They can make an audience weep and make an audience laugh. But in spite of how good they may speak, if they don't have God-defined love – God's kind of love – then that is just noise, it is false teaching that can be dangerous because it can lead people astray.

2. You cannot measure your spiritual maturity by the extent of your gifts.

Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 13:2** ***"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."***

Spiritual gifts are God's idea. He gives them as He sees fit. The gifts are essential for building each other up and functioning as the church of Jesus Christ. A person's spiritual gift-ability compliments another Christian's gift-ability. The gifts are good in themselves. God does not give bad gifts. And so the problem is not with spiritual gifts but with the misuse of spiritual gifts, with the misunderstanding of spiritual gifts, and with an improper emphasis on some gifts to the exclusion of others. Paul mentions three spiritual gifts in this verse:

First, the gift of prophecy. The spiritual gift of prophecy is the Holy Spirit-given ability to take God's Word and explain it to people so that it makes a huge difference in their life. The gift of

prophecy is speaking God's Will so people understand it. Paul points to this gift of – prophecy, and says “If I have this gift, but don't have love, I am just making noise.”

Next Paul mentions the gift of knowledge. The spiritual gift of knowledge is the Holy Spirit-given ability to have understanding or insight into the mysteries of God. We live in awe of extremely knowledgeable people. If you know someone who is super smart, don't you sometimes just go, “Wow! That person sure is brilliant.” I have one friend who I used to be able to meet once in a while for lunch. I really looked forward to just listening to him, because he saw the world in ways I never could have, and he would put things together that I never would have thought about. Just a smart, smart guy!

Paul speaks of the gift of knowledge here. and he exaggerates, like, “Imagine if you could understand all mysteries.” That would be amazing. Wouldn't you like to be able to understand all mysteries? To understand the inner workings of atoms and galaxies, to understand how light can be both a particle and a waveform at the same time, to find the cure for cancer? To be able to explain the Trinity, and Free Will, the end times, to know all the mysteries of Scripture? To explain how bumblebees fly. (You know, bumblebees don't fly – that is scientifically, they can't. It's a mass to wing size ratio thing. Scientifically it shouldn't work that bumblebees can fly, but someone forgot to tell the bees they can't fly, so they went ahead and did it anyway.)

Paul is saying, you got to be careful. He says if you were omniscient, even if you knew everything that God knew, if you did not have love, you would be worthless chatter.

And you know those folks who impress us because they have such a great amount of faith. These are the people who just exude faith. They live by faith. You admire them and say, “Man, I wish I had a faith like ... (so-and-so ...). The spiritual gift of faith is the Holy Spirit-given ability to trust God for impossible things. Paul speaks of a great faith here – a powerful faith that can move mountains. But Paul says, even if I have that kind of faith, but

without love, it's just useless.

This is powerful stuff! To a city of people that lived on shine, and on the biggest and best, to then hear that the biggest and best isn't really the end-all, be-all?!

3. Paul goes on to show them that without love even our best accomplishments are nothing in God's eyes. He makes this 3rd point: **You cannot measure the size of your reward by the depth of your sacrifice.** (again ←)

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:3, ***"If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."***

Money has such a grip on us that some people find it very hard to part with money. Money has a grip on their souls, and the more they make, the harder it is to give. And so, don't we look up to people who are generous? Don't we honor them? We give them status if even only in our mind. So, imagine if someone were to give this church 2 million bucks to build a new family-life outreach center to be used to serve the community and share Jesus, we tend to honor those folks, and we might put their name on the building. Right? Hospitals do this all the time.

So, Paul takes that kind of generosity, a generosity so great few of us can do that, and then he amps it up, he exaggerates it. Imagine if a person were so generous that they gave everything they had --- gave absolutely *everything* – they even went so far as they gave their life, and then even farther, gave their body up to be burned! That would be generosity way, way, way over the top. And if a person actually pulled that off, it would be amazing. BUT if they didn't have love – God's kind of love – all that giving would be just meaningless. Just junk!

You see, love, LOVE, is the only true measure of a life that God calls a success. LOVE is the only quality that truly matters when all else is said and done.

Love is better than all the glitz and glitter. Love is better than the newest, shiniest, and best. Love is better than amazing, smooth, convincing speech. Love is better than knowing

everything and understanding the deepest mysteries. Love is greater than super generosity that gives absolutely everything you got.

You see, friends, there is only ONE – only ONE person who did all that, AND loves. There is only ONE who has glitz that is filled with even heavenly glory. One whose words are so powerful that they can give you life, and hope, and faith, and heaven. There is only ONE who knows every mystery because He is the person who created it all, put it all together in the beginning. There is only ONE who has given everything, even gave His life, and surrendered His body to be crucified as a common criminal. This ONE is Jesus.

AND! AND! AND! Jesus is the ONE who is love. He is more than just an example of extreme love. He IS love!

And this One of Love, Jesus, is the One who made you, who forgives you, and who wants you to be His now and forevermore!

QUESTION FOR YOU ... Does love sound important?

So how many of us here think it would be important for us to know what this love – this love of Jesus – means? How important is it for every one of us know this amazing love of Christ, and how His love plays out in your life?

I have some great news for you. This is the first message in a series entitled, “Love is” On Sundays and Wednesdays, from today all the way through Maundy Thursday, we are going to dive into the “love chapter” of God’s Word. This season of Lent we are going to discover what love is, and how love shows in our lives.

So I have a great goal for you. A wonderful goal for all of us is to aim to not miss any of these messages, because love is what it’s all about in God’s eyes. Love is that important!

Amen.

A final story from Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer, and holocaust survivor: In his book, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, he describes his family life in Hungary during those dark days. His family lived in the shadow of death, knowing that any day the Nazis might arrive at their door. Wiesel tells about a peasant woman by the name of Maria, a Christian, who was almost like a member of their family.

During the early years of the war Maria continued to visit the Wiesel family, but eventually non-Jews were no longer allowed entrance to the ghettos. That did not deter Maria. She found her way through the barbed wire and she came anyway, bringing fruits, vegetables, and cheese. Maria knew of a cabin up in the hills. She offered to take the children, of which Elie was one, and hide them there before the SS came. They decided after much debate to stay together as a family, although they were deeply moved at this gesture.

Years later, this is what Elie Wiesel writes about that good woman: "Dear Maria! If other Christians had acted like her, the trains rolling toward the unknown would have been less crowded. If priests and pastors had raised their voices, if the Vatican had broken its silence, the enemy's hand would not have been so free. But most thought only of themselves. A Jewish home was barely emptied of its inhabitants before they descended like vultures. I think of Maria often, with affection and gratitude, and with wonder as well. This simple, uneducated woman stood taller than the city's intellectuals, dignitaries and clergy. My father had many acquaintances and even friends in the Christian community, not one of them showed the strength of character of this peasant woman. Of what value was their faith, their education, their social position, if it did not arouse their love? It was a simple and devout Christian woman who saved the town's honor."

Maria loved her neighbor and that continues to be our call. In the end, love matters more than anything else, outlasts and outgives everything else, and remains the surest sign that God is present in our lives and in our world. Faith will someday be replaced by certainty. Hope will finally give way to fulfillment. But love? Love has no expiration date. Love is always. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.