

# The importance of love

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

*Pastor Tim Melton*

Have you ever gone through a spiritual wilderness in your life? You were a follower of Christ, but you did not feel like a Christian or even act like a Christian? Maybe it was your anger or irritability. Or maybe a lustful mind or an unholy relationship. Or maybe it was worry, jealousy or greed. Or maybe it was an unforgiving heart. You knew you had put your faith in Christ and were a child of God, but you were struggling with sin that seemed impossible to defeat . . . and maybe you even justified it.

1 Corinthians is a very stern letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth, but in the midst of this letter of correction we find hope and encouragement. Within the Corinthian church there were divisions, greed, pride and sexual immorality, but Paul had not given up hope. Paul's confidence was in the transforming power of the Gospel. Paul had experienced this in his own life and knew the power of Christ to completely change a person's heart. In the midst of the church's sin Paul still addressed them as saints and brothers. In that we find hope. Surely some of those in the congregation would eventually show themselves not to be authentic believers, but many of the others were in the faith but needed to be ushered into maturity. The surrounding culture was pagan and was a constant source of temptation. When these young believers did not abide in Christ, they found themselves drawn back into the patterns of the flesh that they had known before they had met Christ.

Paul knew that becoming like Christ is a lifelong process, so he patiently ministered to his spiritual children through this letter. He called them to the high standard of holiness and then "taking their hand" sought to usher them there.

In the previous verses of 1 Corinthians 12, Paul had reminded the people in the church of Corinth that in the church *"there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are a variety of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone."* All the workings of the church were to be united in God. Through each person's gifts, service and activities, the church was to function like a body where every part was essential. Paul made this

truth very clear, but it was still missing one key ingredient. If they were truly to walk in the excellent way, they had to love each other. 1 Corinthians 13 starts with these words:

***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.***

It is likely that there were some who counted themselves as spiritual because of their religious activity, their spiritual gifts or their service, but Paul is taking it beyond actions and pointing them to the condition of the heart.

Paul is giving extreme examples to make his point clear. Even if one can communicate with many peoples and even angels, if he doesn't have love, his words are nothing but useless noise. Even if one has the gift of prophecy and can understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if he has faith to move mountains, but is not loving, all of these gifts are worth nothing. Even if he makes the ultimate sacrifice and gives away his money and even his life, but has not love, he gains nothing.

Doing religious deeds is not the true indicator that a person is walking with Christ. Having love indicates that one is walking with Christ. Some will find this surprising, but we must look to scripture to confirm this truth. In Matthew 7:21-23 Jesus says these words:

***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"***

These people had done many religious works, but the love of God was not in them. They were busy for Christ, but they did not know Christ. Jesus even referred to these religious people as workers of lawlessness. Perhaps they were trying to earn God's favor by doing good works, but that is not possible. None of us are good enough. All of us have sinned. Because of this, our sin has separated us from God (Isaiah 59:2). Even if our good deeds outnumbered our bad deeds, our sin would still separate us from a holy God. It is only by grace that one can be saved through faith. This is not our own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). On the cross Jesus paid the death penalty for our sin. If we put our trust in Him and turn from our sin, His sacrifice pays for our sin and we are reconciled to God. Good works without a love for God gains us nothing.

In Revelation 2:2-5, we find another helpful passage. Jesus is speaking to the church in Ephesus:

***"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. <sup>3</sup> I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and***

*you have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup> Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”*

In the first example, the people were not believers at all. The love of God was not in them. In this second example, the people of the church in Ephesus were Christians. They had been taught by Paul himself. They had endured, tested false prophets, bore the burden of ministry for the name of Christ and had not grown weary. They were a legitimate body of Christ, but Christ had one thing against them. They had lost their first love.

It is a similar idea that Paul is telling the Corinthians. They were doing good deeds, but without love, in the eyes of God their deeds were worthless. The same applies to us. If we do not have love, even our best religious deeds are worth nothing.

If we are to take this teaching seriously, we must ask, what is love? In our world today, we use the word “love” in many different ways. We love chocolate. We love a movie. We love football. We love summer. Many times our world’s understanding of love is nothing more than a short-lived emotion that comes and goes like a breeze at the beach. Others use love in place of lust. It describes a romantic longing, but has nothing to do with sacrificially seeking the ultimate best for the other person. In English the word “love” is very general and vague in its meaning, but in Greek that is not so. The New Testament was written in Greek and is most helpful as we think about the meaning of love.

In Greek there are four different words for “love”: *eros, storge, phileo, agape*.

The *eros* type of love is the romantic type of love. *Eros* was also used when talking about passion or strong emotion. It comes from Eros, the Greek God of love. When we hear the word “love” today in the media or in society, this is usually the meaning to which they are referring. In English, it is linked to the word “erotic”. While “erotic” has a bad connotation in today’s English, romantic love does not necessarily have to be sinful. For example, this idea of romantic love was illustrated many times in a holy manner between a husband and a wife in the book of Song of Solomon.

A second word for love that is found in the Greek is *storge*. A *storge* love characterizes the love within a family. It is the love a parent has for a child, or the love a brother has for a sister. It describes the love the family members have for one another.

A third Greek word for love is *philia*. *Philia* describes a brotherly love with warm affection. It is the word that described a man or woman’s closest and truest friends. It describes hearts and souls that have been bound together by life experience or as kindred spirits.

In these verses in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul doesn’t use any of these words. Paul uses the Greek word *Agape*. It is an interesting choice of words. Paul did not use *eros*, which is driven by passion and

desire. He did not use *storge*, which is driven by family relation. He did not use *philia*, which is motivated by shared life experiences and kindred spirits. He chose *Agape*.

Among all of these examples of love, *Agape* is the least natural and least common. *Agape* is a love that grants unending goodwill, regardless of how we are treated or how difficult it is. *Agape* is an unconquerable desire for the ultimate good of another, even if they do not deserve it. *Agape* is not motivated by warm feelings or because another person has treated us with love. *Agape* is a selfless, tireless, God-given love that longs for the greatest good of another, even if there is no personal gain or emotional reward in it for us.

*Agape* is a love for people. Whether it be our best friend or our difficult neighbor. Whether it be our sweet mother or our tyrannical boss. Whether it be the bus driver, the person working at the grocery store, our child's teacher, the homeless man in the metro or a total stranger we pass on the street. *Agape* is a heart of love that longs for the greatest good of others.

*Agape* longs for people to be delivered from darkness and brought into the light, and is willing to be a tool in God's hand to bring that about.

*Agape* is the word that Jesus used in Matthew 5:43-4: ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love (Agape) your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."***

An *Agape* love forgives 70 times 7 times. *Agape* says, ***"forgive them for they know not what they do."*** *Agape* turns the other cheek. *Agape* goes the extra mile. *Agape* loves the unlovable, blesses those who persecute you, and never repays evil for evil.

Humanly speaking, *Agape* is illogical. It does not even make sense. Why would a love like this even exist? But it is the deepest definition of love that God gives us in scripture. It is the selfless willingness to sacrifice for the ultimate good of another.

John 15:13 describes it with these words: ***"Greater love (Agape) has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."***

One of the clearest pictures of *Agape* is found in 1 John 4:7-11:

***"Beloved, let us love (Agape) one another, for love (Agape) is from God, and whoever loves (Agapes) has been born of God and knows God.<sup>8</sup> Anyone who does not love (Agape) does not know God, because God is love (Agape).<sup>9</sup> In this the love (Agape) of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.<sup>10</sup> In this is love (Agape), not that we have loved (Agaped) God but that he loved (Agaped) us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.<sup>11</sup> Beloved, if God so loved (Agaped) us, we also ought to love (Agape) one another."***

That was similar to Paul's message to the Corinthians. It was not a call to just tolerate each other or to love one another when they deserve it. It was a self-denying, sacrificial, willful choice to love one

another even when it felt impossible. As they were reminded of the gospel and how God had loved (*Agaped*) them, they would be empowered to love (*Agape*) others.

When we begin to look at many of the key verses in scripture that talk of love, we begin to see how widespread this idea of *Agape* is. Matthew 22:37-40:

***“You shall love (Agape) 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 (Agape) your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”***

All of scripture is based on God’s *Agape* love, and it is through a vertical *Agape* relationship with God that we can *Agape* others around us. There is no other way to have a God-like love except for coming to God.

This is our calling. Not just in the church, but also in the world. We are called to be part of a Christ-centered *Agape* movement in our homes, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods, in this country and in this world. Not for the sake of our church or for our reputation, but so that people of every nation will be reconciled to God.

John 13:34-35 sums it up with these words:

***“A new commandment I give to you, that you love (Agape) one another, even as I have loved (Agaped) you, that you also love (Agape) one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love (Agape) for one another.”***

So, here is the question. Do we love others with an *Agape* love? It is often hard to discern, so Paul wrote these next few verses to help the Corinthians know what an *Agape* love will look like. The first paragraph in 1 Corinthians, which we have already read, talked about spiritual gifts. Paul now describes love by talking about spiritual fruit:

***<sup>4</sup> Love (Agape) 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 (Agape) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> Love (Agape) never ends.***

Some in the church in Corinth might have claimed to have love because they were busy doing religious deeds, but once they were faced with this description it helped them begin to evaluate the condition of their hearts. Many of them had drifted from the *Agape* love that God had intended for them.

This description is convicting and inspiring at the same time. Even if it is not the present description of our lives, it is the hope that we have in Christ. God has given us so much more than rules or laws. As believers, He has put the law of love on our hearts and the Spirit of Christ in us so that we can carry out His command.

These verses describe a condition of the heart. It is selfless, healthy, sacrificial and content. As a believer's needs are met in Christ, she is able to give fully and freely to others for their good. As one rests in the *Agape* of God, they desire good for others and are willing to sacrifice for others as they live in the abundance of God. Competition is gone. Insecurity is gone. Manipulation is gone. Ulterior motives are gone. Bitterness is gone. Love has come.

Paul then finishes with these verses:

***<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.***

Paul is emphasizing the greater importance of love. God granted the gifts of prophecies, tongues and knowledge so that we could know Him better. In heaven none of these will be necessary. They will pass away. We will not need a word of prophecy or knowledge to better know about God, because we will be standing in His presence.

For now, we think like a child in regard to these things of God, but then we will understand fully. For now, we see a dim reflection of God as in a Corinthian mirror made from polished metal, but then we shall see perfectly, face to face. Now we know Him in part, but then we will know Him fully as He knows us. Paul is saying the same thing in three different ways. Our understanding is so limited that God has provided these spiritual gifts to guide us down the path towards Him, but once we are in His presence they will no longer be needed. So, Paul encouraged them to desire the gifts, but to keep it in perspective. Love was the true treasure.

So, for now we rest in faith, hope and love, but when we finally arrive in His presence, faith and hope will no longer be necessary, for the long-awaited prize of Christ will have arrived. Then we will clearly see that the greatest of these is the eternal *Agape* love of God.

If your heart is not characterized by the *Agape* love of God, ask by faith for God to grant you this *Agape* love. As we humble our hearts before Him, may He bring conviction, brokenness, longing and a true *Agape* love for people. May it in turn result in a life of love for others, especially those in the family of God.

## Discussion Questions:

- 1) At times Christians go through a spiritual wilderness when they are far from God. What do you think are common factors that seem to draw them away?
- 2) The church in Corinth was focused more on doing things for God than actually loving God. Why do you think people make this mistake?
- 3) What about 1 Corinthians 13 is most meaningful to you?
- 4) How would you describe *Agape* love in your own words?
- 5) What do you think God wants you to remember from this study of 1 Corinthians 13?
- 6) What do you think God wants you to do because of this?