

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Sermon Title: "The Greatest of These" (A Journey through First Corinthians)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

June 25, 2017

{SLIDE 1} The Love Chapter. We all know what Chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians is all about. We may know it so well, we could quote some of the details. Maybe not in order, but we could say that "love is patient and love is kind."

However, try to imagine, if you would, that you are living in Corinth, and you are reading Paul's first letter to you for the first time. Imagine, if you would, that you come to Chapter 13 and you had never heard such language in your life. You know about love if you are a Greek, because the Greeks teach that there are four types of love. There is *philos*, which is brotherly and sisterly love. There is *eros*, which is desire for somebody. There is *storge*, which is a love family have for each other. There is *agape*, which is unconditional love.

Paul speaks of *agape* love, when he mentions love in Chapter 13, but you have never heard such love describe with such emotion, with such consideration and devotion.

If you are a Jew, you know about love. The

greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Give your all to God. Never hold back. But then, you never heard love being described with such detail, such accuracy. You have never really understood what is involved with loving the Lord your God or anybody else.

Chapter 13 is new to you. It is a fresh look at something we all need, but something we may all take for granted. Love.

{SLIDE 2} Paul just speak to us about spiritual gifts in Chapter 12. He listed a few, and told us that each gift is given to benefit the entire church. One person may carry out the gift, but the rest of God's people reap the rewards of its use.

In verse 31 of Chapter 12, Paul tells the Corinthian Christians and us to "strive for the greater gifts." Pray for the best spiritual gifts that God could give you. Eagerly seek out God for those gifts that will do the most for all of God's people. It seems as though Paul is urging the Corinthians to be all that they can be, just as the Army commercials used to tell us. Paul wants them to "Be More," just as the PBS stations say. Chick-Fil-A says, "Eat More Chikin," but Paul says, "Get more spiritual gifts." So at the end of Chapter 12, it sounds as though spiritual gifts is where it is at. If

you have great gift from God, then you will be a great person. If you want to be Mr. Christian or Miss or Mrs. Christian, a shining example to all, go get those spiritual gifts and rock the world for Jesus. This is the impression we have at the end of Chapter 12.

{SLIDE 3} And then Paul turns the tables. He wants those Corinthian Christians to strive for the greater spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit could give, but Paul says that spiritual gifts is not the end-all and be-all of Christianity. They are very important, but Paul says that there is something even more important. “I will show you a still more excellent way.”¹ And then he takes us right into Chapter 13, The Love Chapter.

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels...” Those are spiritual gifts: the ability to speak in a different language that people already speak on the world, and the ability to speak a heavenly language that only can be interpreted by those who understand it. Those could be considered greater gifts as Paul said earlier. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”² Hm. The spiritual gifts of tongue is impressive, but if a person has no love then why have that spiritual gift. Without love that gift becomes

¹ Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:31.

² 1 Corinthians 13:1.

useless.

“If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge...” Again, an impressive spiritual gift. John the disciple had such a powerful gift. Just read the Gospel of John and Revelation, and you will get into some deep spiritual stuff. Paul continues: “and if I have faith and can move all mountains...” Wouldn’t that be great? Jesus told his disciples that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could tell the mountain on which Jerusalem rested to move and throw itself into the sea.³ “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith and can move all mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”⁴ Hm. So if a person could know all things about the universe and about God, and could say a word and make things happen, but has no love, what is the point of knowing all things or saying anything? Again, without love those gifts becomes useless.

“If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”⁵ We get the idea now. Jesus tells us to lose our lives in order to gain them. Jesus tells a rich man to give away all his possessions, and

³ Cf. Matthew 21:21.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:2.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:3.

then he would have the kingdom of God.⁶ But Paul says that if we do such things and there is not one ounce of love in our hearts, nothing is gained.

{SLIDE 4} I have read 1 Corinthians so many times, but when I read verses 1-3 last week, I thought of something that I had never thought of before. There is only one Person who walked the earth who could do all those things that Paul mentioned. He is Jesus. Jesus had all the spiritual gifts that Paul lists and then some.

Speaking in the languages of human and angels: Jesus dwelt with the angels before he was born in Bethlehem. Prophecy and understand all mysteries: Jesus was and is God, so he knows the fabric of the universe intimately. The fellowship he had and has with God the Father and the Holy Spirit is tighter, is more solid, is more loving than any relationship we could ever have with a person. Faith: Christ gives us faith. Giving away all possessions and giving up his body: Jesus marched to the cross and died for all our sins. Jesus is the only One who exhibits all the spiritual gifts that could be given: miracle, utterance of wisdom and knowledge, teaching, compassion.

{SLIDE 5} Yet, if Jesus did not have love first, none

⁶ Cf. Matthew 10:38-39 and 19:21.

of that would have mattered. If Jesus had no love for creation, then all of his spiritual gifts that he possesses would lose their power. Jesus would be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. He would not be our Savior. He would not save us from anything. If Jesus had no love, there would be no point for him to come to earth to teach us anything, and dare I say his death would have been his fault altogether.

{SLIDE 6} This is if Christ had no love. We know Christ had and has love for everything and every person. What does John 3:16-17 tells us: “For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son...” What does Matthew 15:32 and 20:34 say when Jesus saw crowds of hungry people and a two blind without sight: “He had compassion for them...” This is how powerful and how important love is. Jesus Christ, as great as he was and is, with all the authority on earth he could muster, also had to have love, never ending, always pouring out. His love moved him to be our Savior. His love moved him to be our Servant and Master with all the gifts that he possessed. His love moved him to a cross and a tomb and back to the skies in all glory. This is how powerful and how important love is, if it also applies to Jesus.

{SLIDE 7} Paul outlines what love is. Forgive me for methodically going through each point that Paul

makes, but if we were reading his list for the first time we would go through it methodically, slowly and carefully.

“Love is patient.”⁷ We pray to God, “Give me patience, and give it to me now!” Love says, “It’s okay. Take your time. Take all the time you want. Seriously. Do not rush it ever.” Love has forever to wait.

“Love is kind.” Love shows oneself useful. This is the translation from Greek. Never a hindrance but always a help. Never an obstacle but always the passageway up, around, or through.

“Love is not envious.” Paul once told the Roman to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to mourn with those who mourn.⁸ Love does not wish to have what they possess; love wishes for them to have a blessed life with all joy and faith in Christ.

“Love is not boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist in getting its own way.” Love does not stand on a desk and scream, “Here I am! I am Love! You better acknowledge me or else!” Love flows without drawing attention to itself. It just touches another person’s life and they feel special. Love just flows through us, and people are lifted up from their burdens, and we are all united in a greater fellowship

⁷ The following is found in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

⁸ Romans 12:15

with each other and God. There is no “I” or ‘me” with love. It is “us” and “our God and Savior.”

“Love is not irritable or resentful.” This kind of goes back to love being patient. What is there to get upset about? What is all the fuss and bother? There is nothing to bug us; we may rejoice in all things. There is nothing to regret; we hope in all things.

“Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.” Love seeks the heart of Jesus Christ. Love wants to imitate the life of Jesus. If Jesus was all compassion toward others, then love wants to influence us all to be compassionate toward others. There is no room for sin. There is all room for God and being God’s disciples.

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Love is solid, the toughest thing on the planet. Love always looks ahead to where God is leading and choose to go that direction. Love will always move us through the rough times so we may be in the light of God on the other end.

“Love never ends.” All the spiritual gifts that we have, they will possibly end when we leave this earth. If our spiritual gifts are only used for ministry here, then we will not need them for the next life. Paul seems to refer to this in verses 8-10. However, we will always need love. Love is the eternal constant. Just as our God is everlasting – Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit – so love is everlasting. Just as we are everlasting through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, love will always be at our side, drawing us together, keeping us in close association to each other and our God.

{SLIDE 8} Our Savior needed love to be our Savior. We need love to be God’s people together, and we need love to help a world that is broken and lost.

And we need to constantly grow in love. Our hearts need to continue to expand so that more love may enter. Our minds need to continue to develop so that more love from God may fill our thoughts. Paul seems to say in verses 11-12 that we need to stop being immature and strive to be more mature. He might even imply that love urges us to grow up and become more of an adult who appreciates what love may do for us. We would desire to have more love for God and others.

{SLIDE 9} One of my commentaries said that Paul was “no Peter Pan.”⁹ We know about Peter Pan: he refused to grow up. There is a fascination about being children, and maybe we miss those years when we were young, but when it comes to love, and the love that comes from God, cannot cling to those earlier

⁹ Leon Morris, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians*, cf. 180.

years. We cannot remain as children who refuse to grow up. We are called to be children of God who strive to mature, knowing more and more about God every day.

The idea of Paul not being Peter Pan also made me think of another green fellow: the Grinch who stole Christmas. Dr. Seuss speaks of a terrible being whose heart was two sizes too small. He had no room at all for love. He had no desire to grow out of his miserable state. He remained stubborn and frustrated and even vengeful, until the Spirit of Christmas changed his heart. He saw the love that the Whos in Who-ville had for each other, and that love affected him in great degrees. His heart grew and grew until it measured three sizes more. Love demands us to mature.

{SLIDE 10} “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child,” Paul says. “When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹⁰ Paul could very well have said that when Christ got a hold of him, and Paul realized what a child he was acting like, he put away his childish ideas. He put away the immature thoughts and conclusions that did not help him to know God more deeply. He strived to be more like an adult, realizing that there is so much more to learn, so much more to

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

do. Faith in Christ is a constant process, for there is always another chance and another chance to study, to worship, to serve, and to fellowship with our everlasting God.

{SLIDE 11} “The greatest of these is love.”¹¹ Love is what motivated God to send his Son to us, so that we may be saved from our sin. Love motivated Jesus Christ to be our Servant, our Example, our Friend, and our Lord and Savior. Love, flowing from Christ, motivates us to accept Christ and to serve him with all our spiritual gifts. Love causes those gifts to be more effective. Love causes people to want to know more about Christ and receive salvation from him.

“The need for genuine, Christ-like love remains as great today” as it was during Paul’s time.¹² Paul details for us what it is and how it influences our spiritual gifts and Christian lives. It may take a lifetime to read his words again and again just to understand them. It definitely takes a lifetime to practice the love of God, which we may do with all joy and thanksgiving.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

¹² Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 264.

Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the Good News from Psalm 103: the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. God does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us. Friends, believe this news: we are forgiven - thanks be to God! Amen.