

IN KEEPING LOVE FIRST & FOREMOST**1 CORINTHIANS 12:31 – 13:13**

Imagine you've been convicted of a terrible crime. You're given the chance to speak for a few minutes before your execution. What would you say? The Texas Department of Criminal Justice maintains a digital archive of every inmate's last statement going back to 1976. This amounts to 534 prisoners. Someone analyzed all of these prisoners' final statements for common words and patterns. Of the 534 total inmates, 417 inmates either spoke or wrote out a final statement. The most common word, used by 63 percent of all of them, was the word "love." In most cases, the word "love" is used to address family members who are present at the execution on the other side of the glass window. But it's also used to express feelings toward the victim's family members, lawyers, the court, and even the warden and prison staff. Here are a few examples of the actual last words from death row inmates: "I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. Take care y'all."... "I say this with love: I'm sorry. I say this for my family with love and with God, I love you. To the family of my boss, I love you. All I have is love." ... "First, I would like to give praise to God for the love and grace that he has allowed for all of this to come together." *No matter who we are, no matter how much we struggle in life, deep down we're all hungry to give and receive love—from God and others. Today, I want you to think with me about love.*

For many followers of Jesus, 1 Corinthians 13 is the most wonderful chapter in the entire Bible. It's the love chapter. And it is wonderful. I've read that chapter in just about every wedding I've officiated. That's kind of ironic because Paul didn't have marriage in mind when he wrote it. Now, it's not wrong to apply what he wrote there about love to the marriage relationship. Not at all. But that's not what prompted him to write it. Instead, he was trying to get the theology of his Christian friends in Corinth straightened out. He was the first one to bring the good news about Jesus to that great city in Greece. After he won some people to saving faith in the Lord and established a congregation, Paul left to evangelize elsewhere. The church back in Corinth grew and flourished. At some point, they sent a letter to Paul asking him about various things. The letter we now refer to as 1 Corinthians was his response to their letter. Paul loved these people deeply. The Corinthians Christians were saved, born again people, to be sure, but they were also monumentally ignorant and immature spiritually.

We're nearing the end of our study of 1 Corinthians. I've entitled this series of messages, "In Whatever You Do": Discovering What It Means to Glorify God." I believe the key verse might well be found in 10:31 (NLT), "So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Paul wanted the Corinthians – and us – to know that all followers of Jesus are called and expected to magnify God, to seek to honor God, and to glorify God in everything: every situation, every circumstance, every task, and every relationship. Chapter 13 is Paul's definitive answer to how you and I can accomplish that goal. Keep love first and foremost. Here are three great truths to process this morning. First, I must keep love first and foremost because...

LOVE IS WHAT'S MOST NECESSARY.

Let's read the first three verses. There's a kind of progression here I don't want you to miss. Paul moves from what's important to what's more important to what's most important. He moves from what's valuable to what's more valuable to what's most valuable. For example, we learn here that love is more necessary than spiritual gifts. Next week, we'll consider chapter 14 where it becomes clear the Corinthians were fixated and fascinated in an unhealthy way on the spiritual gift of tongues. Why? They probably thought it was the language angels spoke; therefore, if they could speak in tongues they were becoming like angels. In other words, they thought speaking in tongues meant they'd arrived spiritually. Tongues for them was the highest, best, and most important mark of being a godly, spiritual person. Paul's response? Think again. Now, speaking in tongues was certainly a real, legitimate gift of the Holy Spirit – just as it is today – but it was never meant to be the greatest evidence you're filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul said, "If you can speak in tongues, but you can't show love, you're about as useful to the Kingdom of God as a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Being able to speak in tongues is important and valuable, to be sure, but it's not as necessary as love."

Then, Paul mentioned three other spiritual gifts: prophecy, knowledge, and faith. Now, Paul himself valued the spiritual ability to give a prophetic word in a worship gathering more than tongues. Why? All God's people could then be encouraged simply because everyone could understand it. The gift of wisdom or knowledge was highly prized by the Corinthians for many of the same reasons they valued tongues. Faith, here, wasn't what every Christian demonstrates when you put your trust in Jesus to be saved. Instead, this was the ability or gift to evoke the supernatural or miraculous. This was mountain moving faith. It could be argued prophecy, knowledge, and faith were even more important and valuable spiritual gifts than tongues, but even they weren't as necessary as love. They didn't prove you had arrived spiritually either. Without love, they were essentially useless to Jesus and His Church. Love is what's most necessary.

But then Paul mentioned another possible evidence of being at the top level spiritually. "If I gave everything I have to the poor... but do not have love, I gain nothing." 1 Cor. 13:3 NLT) In other words, love is more necessary than showing compassion for others. Is it possible to feed the hungry, give money to poor people, or in some other way show compassion for the needs of other people and not really be motivated by love? Of course. It can be done for selfish or self-serving reasons – to draw attention to yourself, to encourage people to admire you, or to meet your own ego needs. Now, in the grand scheme of things, showing great compassion for poor people may be even more important and valuable than having all kinds of spiritual gifts, but it isn't as necessary as love. Love is what's most necessary.

Paul even mentioned yet another evidence for high level spirituality. "If I... even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing." (1 Cor. 13:3 NLT) In other words, love is more necessary than personal sacrifice. Paul was likely thinking about some of the things he himself had endured in order to tell lost people about Jesus: being attacked, being beaten, being thrown into

prison, suffering hunger and thirst. Many Christians believe the Christian life is all about sacrifice – sacrificing your money or your life in some way for the cause of Jesus Christ. Isn't personal sacrifice serving Jesus very important and valuable? Absolutely. But, if it isn't motivated by the love the Holy Spirit puts in you, it's ultimately useless. Each thing described in those first three verses is a good thing. Speaking in tongues: Good. Prophecy, knowledge, and faith: Very good. Showing compassion for others: Even better. Personal sacrifice: Wonderful. But love is so valuable and so important, that apart from it, every other good thing is useless. Without love, a Christian misses the point of being a follower of Jesus in the first place. Love is what's most necessary. Secondly, I must keep love first and foremost because...

LOVE IS OBSERVABLE ACTIONS OR BEHAVIOR.

Let's read the next section of this chapter (13:4-7). That's powerful, isn't it? The Greeks had at least four different words that could be translated into English as "love." There was "eros" or romantic love, "phileo" or the kind of affectionate love you have for a close friend, and "storge" or the kind of love parents have for their kids. The final word for love in the Greek language was "agape." The New Testament writers used that word to refer to God's kind of love. Guess what word Paul used for love here? Agape. So, quite clearly, I'm expected to express God's kind of love. How do you define God's kind of love? It's a self-giving love that gives without demanding or expecting repayment. It's love so great it can be given to the unlovable or unappealing. It's love that continues to love even when it's rejected. It's sacrificial, giving, self-denying love. It's the best and highest kind of love out there. The best example of agape is Jesus dying on the cross in our place to pay the penalty for our sins. But because the Holy Spirit now lives in us, we are enabled to love with God's kind of love.

When we read those verses – v. 4-7 in 1 Corinthians 13 – it's very clear I'm expected to express God's kind of love. God's love is never an idea, a feeling, or an emotion to get me motivated. It behavior we can observe. To love like God loves is to act in certain ways. True love – God's kind of love – is always demonstrated by action or behavior. In other words, you know it when you see it. It can be observed, seen, and recognized by God, by other people, and even by myself. Paul went on to list here about fifteen different characteristics of godly love. In other words, God's love in me (agape) does and doesn't do specific things. Have you ever asked the question, "What is love?" Paul answered that question by describing what loves does and what love doesn't do.

It's very instructive to just walk through these definitions of love. Love is patient and kind. That's God's attitude toward us – sinful human beings. And when agape is flowing through us, we will show patience and kindness toward those who annoy and hurt us. When a new website launches, or when a website launches a new feature, they commonly go public for a period of time as what is called a "beta" site. For example, Google for years called their email feature—Gmail—a beta site. A beta site is a test site that's available for the public to use, but with the understanding that you may find bugs in it. The site is not making any claims to have everything worked out to perfection. If you find a problem with a beta site, you think to yourself, "Oh yeah! This is

still a beta site. Maybe I should send the designers an email so they know they still have a problem here.” You don't get angry with a beta site if you find something that doesn't work correctly. A beta site is a "grace-expected" web site. The site is counting on you to give them grace. Applying this idea to the Christian life, we will be more like Jesus if we treat the people we live and work with each day as beta Christians. Like us, they are all a work in progress. They all need grace. None of them is perfect yet. We should go through every day expecting we will need to give patience and kindness all day long.

Love isn't jealous or envious. Agape never resents it when others are blessed or wants what others have been given. Love isn't boastful or proud. Agape doesn't call attention to yourself or feel the need to magnify or enlarge who you are or what you do before others. Love doesn't need attention or the limelight. It's impossible for agape to be arrogant or to show off. Love never dishonors other human beings or is rude toward them. Oh, Christian, we have precious few examples of that behavior among our nation's leaders right now, so it's up to you, me, and God's people to exhibit that characteristic of love. Love treats everyone with respect because every person is made in God's image and is someone for whom Jesus died and rose again.

Love is never self-seeking or demands its own way. Its goal isn't self-fulfillment, but what will truly benefit those around us. Agape is other-centered not self-centered. Love isn't easily angered or irritable. Agape has a very long fuse. I think about how God disqualified Moses from entering the Promised Land. Why? Moses had anger issues. He allowed himself to get so annoyed by the people of Israel that he disobeyed God's instructions. Love keeps no record of wrongs. That's an accounting word. It means to write something down so it won't be forgotten. In other words, agape refuses to become bitter, resentful, or cling to past hurts. It's learned how to forget what needs to be put in the past and left there. Love never rejoices in evil or injustice. Agape can't ever find any pleasure in whatever wounds God's heart. Instead, love rejoices in whatever is true and whenever truth wins the day. Agape always wants the truth to prevail. Christian, again, I think of our country right now. May we always be people who stand up for the truth and promote the truth, and to do so with grace, patience, and kindness toward others.

Love is always protective of others in a good way. Another Bible verse helps us to understand what Paul meant here. “Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Pt. 4:8 NLT). Agape refuses to throw anyone away as if they've become unworthy of God's love or forgiveness. Love always trust or never loses faith. Agape believes the best about other people unless indisputable facts demand otherwise. Love is always hopeful. Agape is confident in the future, because its hope is in God who holds the future in His hands. Love always perseveres. Agape endures through every negative, hurtful circumstance. It destroys enemies by turning them into friends. It refuses to give up because its hope is in God.

Not only are those characteristics of love instructive, they're humbling and challenging. Have you ever read that Scripture and put your name in the place of the word “love”? Let me give you an example. “Rick is patient. Rick is kind. Rick does not envy. Rick

does not boast. Rick is not proud. Rick does not dishonor others. Rick is not self-seeking. Rick is not easily angered. Rick keeps no record of wrongs. Rick does not delight in evil. Rick rejoices with the truth. Rick always protects. Rick always trusts. Rick always hopes. Rick always perseveres.” Oh, boy.... How convicting is that! How wonderful if that was all true! Nevertheless, that’s God’s expectation of me and every follower of Jesus. Love is not a warm feeling or a pleasant ideal. It’s Holy Spirit-inspired action – behavior – that can be observed by God, others, and myself. Here’s a final truth to mull over today. I must keep love first and foremost because...

LOVE ALONE IS PERMANENT.

Let’s hear the final verses in this chapter (13:3-13). We learn here that the need for spiritual gifts will not last forever. Again, remember the Corinthians had made the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues the greatest evidence of spirituality. Paul said, “Think again.” When we all get to Heaven and the Kingdom of God comes in all of its fullness, any and all spiritual gifts will become unnecessary. Speaking in tongues, prophecy, knowledge, wisdom, faith, evangelism, teaching – any and every spiritual gift - will cease to be needed or used. Sure, they’re great and wonderful now if and when we use them properly to build up the Body of Christ, but don’t make them the be and end all of the Christian life. Why? Because whatever is eternal is more important than whatever is temporary. It’s like when the sun comes up in the morning. At night, we use and enjoy lights and lamps of many different kinds. But when the sun rises up in all of its glory on a cloudless day, the need for other kinds of light is unnecessary. Spiritual gifts have their place here and now, but one day they will disappear. They won’t be needed anymore. They’re not permanent.

Instead, focus on love. Why? Love is the greatest spiritual reality because it alone lasts forever. “Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever!” (1 Cor. 13:8 NLT) Love alone is permanent. Paul brings out another remarkable truth right there at the end. “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:13 NIV) Faith, hope, and love embrace just about everything involved in being a follower of Jesus. We have faith toward God to forgive us and accept us through Jesus. We trust in God’s goodness and mercy even though we don’t see Him. And then, we have hope for the future guaranteed through Jesus. We also have love for one another as we live out this life of faith and hope. Faith, hope, and love represent the total, saving relationship between human beings and God. But why is love the greatest of these three spiritual realities: faith, hope, and love? Because only love is permanent. We won’t need faith anymore when we’re living in the new Heaven and the new Earth. We will see God face to face. We won’t need hope anymore either. Our greatest hope will have been more than fulfilled. But we will always love the Lord and each other. We will continue to grow in that love through eternity.

There’s another reason love is greater than even faith or hope. Love is the greatest spiritual reality because it’s an attribute of God. God doesn’t possess or need faith because He never has to put His trust in anyone or anything beyond Himself. God

doesn't possess or need hope because He knows all things and is in complete control of everything at all times. But the Bible says God is love and would not be God without it. "But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.... God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them." (1 John 4:8, 16 NLT) If you want to glorify God in whatever you do – every circumstance, every situation, every task, and every relationship – pursue love. Keep love first and foremost.

There's a true story about a church that had an incredible ministry to men. For years the driving force behind the men's ministry was a man named Taylor. His ministry rocked on for years, changing lives, and impacting the community. But in the midst of a major transition within the church, Taylor got hurt deeply by his church community and left. He wouldn't talk to anybody. People figured he'd come back to the church eventually, but he didn't. Finally, some of the men in the church took it upon themselves to reach out to Brother Taylor. They came up with a bold plan. They set up camp in Taylor's yard—150 men! They set up rotating shifts and said they wouldn't leave until Taylor came out. They had electric lines running from neighboring houses to power their TVs. About twenty smokers and grills worked up some great barbeque food. They were in for the long haul. They even had big signs all over the place: "Taylor, come out." "We love you." "Taylor, we know you're in there."

Well, Brother Taylor didn't appreciate it. He even called the police on his former friends. The police showed up twice a day for almost a week. Every time they came, Taylor would come to the door to explain the situation. And every time he emerged, the men camping in his yard would explode with cheers until Taylor finished his chat with the police and went back inside. But on the sixth day - when Taylor opened the door for the police and the men exploded with cheers - Taylor finally broke down and started crying his eyes out. He sputtered how sorry he was, and then he came down from his front porch and greeted the men who had camped in his yard and refused to go away.

That's the power of love – God's kind of agape love. Love is what's most necessary in this world, in this country, in this church, in our neighborhoods, and in our families. Love is always about observable actions and behavior. And love alone is permanent. When all is said and done, all that's left will be love. For that reason, if you want to glorify God in whatever you do, keep love first and foremost.