

“The Excellent Way”
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
October 21, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

As we continue to look at the kind of life we are called to as God’s followers, we’re looking again today at what it means to be a part of a loving community. When we follow Christ, we enter into a community characterized by worship, learning, loving and serving. God has designed us to live in community, and this community is to be characterized by love for one another. Theologians have discerned in the Trinity the theological roots of loving community. God himself has existed in a loving community for eternity. It’s called the Trinity—one God existing in three persons. His image bearers are created for community just as the eagle was created to soar. It is possible to survive in isolation from others, but it is not possible to thrive in such isolation.

Perhaps you read of the recent study conducted on the topic of isolation. Published in *The American Sociological Review*, the findings of this study were disturbing. There has been a dramatic drop in the size of people’s core network of confidants. A confidant is defined in the study as someone near you with whom you talk about the important issues of your life. The average American has just two such confidants, compared to three as recently as 1985. Even more alarming, those reporting no confidants has jumped from 10 to 25 percent. And on the healthy end of the scale, the number of those reporting at least 4 confidants is half of what it was in 1985. More and more, the confidants are limited to those with whom we live, suggesting a further narrowing of community. Despite the popularity of such television shows as *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, shows portraying people significantly involved in one another’s lives (not always in healthy ways), we seem as a society to be substituting our watching of people in community with being in community.

1 Corinthians 13 is known as the love chapter. There is one absolute requirement for love that is so obvious that Paul doesn’t mention it—other people. If we are to obey 1 Corinthians 13, we must be in community with others. I don’t mean internet communities or imaginary communities such as the ones we see on television, but real flesh and blood communities. We need communities of people who learn to speak the truth in love, who forgive one another, who rebuke and bear with one another. We need communities characterized by a true, biblical love, not the sentimentalized and sanitized version we so often get. Let’s look now at what Paul teaches us here about the kind of genuine love we need.

I. The Preeminence of Love

It is ironic that this chapter is so popular when its message is so alarming. These first three verses are often read as if they do nothing more than recommend love in a poetic way. But they don't merely recommend love, they require love as being of the essence of a true faith. When Paul says in verse 2 that without love **"I am nothing,"** he is saying that we haven't made it to first base in our Christian lives if we don't have love. This is not meant to nullify faith, but to clarify it. The kind of faith that saves a person and takes him to heaven is a faith that produces the fruit of love. If there is no love, there is no faith.

Jonathan Edwards preached a series of sermons on this chapter that he used to help his church members answer this question of the sincerity of their faith. He ministered in the midst of a great revival called the Great Awakening. Revivals have always attracted people who are drawn to the excitement and the visible effects of the revival, but in whose lives there is no real work of God. Edwards felt that his church had several in this category, and he preached these sermons to help them see their need of a deep work of God in the heart.

So Paul uses love as a test, saying in these verses that if there is no love, there is no faith. Note how he does this. He selects some things that the Corinthians were known to value highly, like the gifts of tongues and prophecy, and then says that these things are nothing without love. He then imagines the supreme expression of these gifts and says that even such an expression is nothing without love. If a person could speak in all the tongues of men and of angels, that would be an impressive gift. But Paul says it's really just a lot of irritating noise if not accompanied by love, amounting to nothing more than a loud gong or a clanging cymbal. Expressions of love, no matter how eloquently stated, are not the same thing as really loving. True love is more than words. The same is the case with other gifts. Paul will speak in the next chapter about the importance of the gift of prophecy, but he says here that even the possession of this gift to the greatest degree imaginable is nothing if not accompanied by love. He asks us to imagine the possession of this gift to the point that a person is able to understand all mysteries. What if you could be given such a gift? Answers to age-old questions like why people suffer and how God can be both sovereign and man be responsible, are made known to you. Paul says that even if this was the case, if they are present without love, then you are nothing. Notice that he doesn't say merely that love is greater than gifts like tongues and prophecy. He says that all of these things are useless without love. Literally, the last phrase of verse 2 reads, "I become nothing" without love. The same is true in Christian service. Even if you give everything away, including your life in martyrdom, you gain nothing. So in the areas of worship (speaking in tongues), understanding and service, excelling in all of these without love is worthless.

The three gifts and two spiritual deeds Paul mentions in these first three verses were the things that were seen as impressive in the Corinthian church. Let's imagine what might be included on a comparable list for us. We would have to include efficiency on such a list. Paul is saying, "If you possess an efficiency to the point that you can get twice as much accomplished in a day as the next most

efficient person, but don't love others, you would be better off staying home and watching TV all day." Christians today tend to value parenting expertise. Paul would say to us, "If you are such a good parent that your children turn out to be the stars in every area of life, and you are asked to be the keynote speaker at parenting seminars around the country, but you don't have love, you have done nothing." We could go on and on with examples, but I think you get the point. Love is the one thing that cannot be faked. A person can give all they possess to the poor without being a Christian. They can offer themselves in martyrdom and still not truly have a relationship with Jesus. But there is one thing you will never do apart from the transforming power of Jesus, and that's to truly love God and others. That brings us to our next point. What does it mean truly to love others?

II. The Practice of Love

In four short verses, Paul lists a total of fifteen characteristics of Christian love. He begins with two positive qualities and ends with five positives, and in between lists eight negative qualities describing what love is not. We won't have time to look at all of these, so let's just look at a few of them, beginning with patience. **"Love is patient."** The word in the Greek means literally "Long suffering." Love is willing to suffer for a long period of time. Our instinct is usually to have a short fuse at the many interruptions and irritations of life. We all crave a trouble-free life and have some agenda for acquiring it. We call that a schedule. But then other people intrude into our lives with a different agenda that disrupts this schedule. We suffer short instead of suffering long. The result is often to become irritable. Irritability is something of the opposite of patience, which is why Paul adds in verse 5 that love **"is not irritable."** My family can tell you when I am irritable. I utter this little sound of frustration that they all know and dread. Such irritability can easily escalate to anger, and it happens because we don't trust God. Try to imagine if you can the kind of life that doesn't try to control others. It is a life that trusts God with the interruptions that inevitably come. This is the kind of life necessary for the putting away of irritability and the embracing of patience. It sees our day as something of an adventure with God. It is good to make our plans for the day, but it is also good to commit those plans to God and allow him to alter them through the interruptions he brings into our lives through the needs of people around us.

Love is kind. There is a generous kindness about love. It gives to others based on their needs rather than our own. I spoke with someone this week who had the opportunity to visit someone who was sick and confined to his home for several months while recovering. The sick person had family who would come in and meet any needs present, but there was a cold efficiency about their efforts. The stays were always brief and focused on taking care of business. As soon as it was taken care of, the family members were gone. That's not love. This kind of parsimonious gesture is actually the opposite of love because it is completely self-focused. It is really asking, "What is the quickest way I can meet this obligation I

have so I don't feel guilty about failing to care for a family member?" The person I was talking to, on the other hand, spent a couple of hours out of a busy schedule just talking and lingering. Which one, do you think, felt more loving to the sick person? Love shows such kindness.

Three of these qualities go together. **"Love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant"** (v. 4). The word translated "arrogant" means literally to be puffed up. It refers to the pride that just wants to look good, but on the inside is empty. One of the chief reasons we don't love is the pride that makes us want to look good by comparing ourselves with others. Such comparisons result in envy or boasting. When we compare and find ourselves lacking, we envy others. When we compare and judge ourselves superior, we want to boast. In both cases, others become our rivals by which we attempt to puff ourselves. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis says the following about pride:

Now what you want to get clear is that Pride is *essentially* competitive—is competitive by its very nature—while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If every one else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone (p. 103).

It is this pride that often keeps us isolated from others. To say it differently, humility, pride's opposite, brings us together in relationship with others. It gives us a completely different starting point with others. Pride leads to a starting point that says, "You are my rival, and I will attempt to boost myself by comparing myself with you." Humility says, "God has brought the two of us together because of some ways I can serve you, and because you have some ways you can help me. I am in need of such help." In an article he wrote about community, Paul Tripp says that he is committed to praying three prayers. "Lord, I am a man in desperate need of help. Lord, I pray that you would send your helpers my way. And please give me the humility to receive the help when it comes" (In *By Faith*, Oct/Nov 07, p. 54).

III. The Permanence of Love

Love will pass the billion-year test. The true test of the importance of something is whether it will still be important one billion years from now. A great number of things will not be of great importance then. No one will be talking, or even remember, yesterday's football scores. Even many of the really important things will fade in the passing of one billion years. Paul says that the gift of prophecy, which is really important, will one day pass away. The same will be true of the spiritual gifts of knowledge and tongues.

In the series of sermons Jonathan Edwards preached on this chapter, the concluding one was titled, "Heaven, a World of Love." In this sermon, he describes heaven as the place where love is perfected. So, for example, when he says that love does not envy, that means that there will be no envy in heaven. Here's how Edwards says it:

In heaven ... not the least remainder of any principle of envy shall exist to be exercised toward angels or other beings who are superior in glory; nor shall there be aught like contempt or slighting of those who are inferiors. Those that have a lower station in glory than others, suffer no diminution of their own happiness by seeing others above them in glory. On the contrary, all the members of that blessed society rejoice in each other's happiness, for the love of benevolence is perfect in them all.

One of the illustrations that Paul gives to show the permanence and importance of love is the difference between the values of children and those of adults. When I was a child, I had a nice collection of baseball and football cards that was very important to me. I've changed. I don't know what happened to that collection, and I don't really care that much. An adult, knowing what he knows, would never want to go back and be a child again. When we come to understand that love is really important, everything else to which we have given ourselves will be like a child's baseball card collection in comparison.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with two applications. First, we are to value love as God values it. Part of that will require that we resist the demonic forces that attempt to isolate us from one another. We become far more susceptible to temptation when we are isolated from one another. What step do you need to take to move back toward community and away from isolation? Do you need to join a small group? Do you need to become more honest in your relationships? Do you need to pray as indicated earlier, asking God to send his helpers and give us the humility to receive them?

Second, the Bible is clear that there is only one source of love and that is faith. Love is the fruit that comes from the tree called faith. It is as we receive the love of Jesus that we come to have power to love others. So we must see Jesus as the one who perfectly embodies the qualities of love listed here. Jesus is patient because love is patient. To be patient is to suffer long. Do you know that Jesus has suffered long for your sake? He continues to be patient with you, not counting your sins against you. Jesus bears all things and endures all things. May God open our eyes to see afresh the love of Jesus for us!