

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Greatest of These is Love

Without Love...Nothing

(1 Corinthians 13)

Study #1

Introduction: Oily adventures...

Now that our cars are highly computerized, I have, for the most part, gotten out of the routine of home auto repair. However, before the advent of sophisticated high-tech engines and transmissions, I enjoyed working on our cars and fixed what was broken as I was able.

My first forays into auto mechanics, though, wouldn't have made anyone optimistic about my future in car repair.

During my high school days, my next door neighbor, who was a year older than me, worked on his car all the time. I knew that he had changed spark plugs and wires, so I decided to do the same.

I bought six spark plugs and six plug wires for my 1960 Mercury Comet, opened the hood and removed all of the old plugs and wires, not knowing that I should have replaced one wire at a time so that I would know where to place the new ones. I was totally confused and had no idea where to put the wires while my next door neighbor was rolling on the grass laughing.

I also knew that cars needed to have their oil changed. So, one day I drained the oil, put on a new filter, replaced the oil plug and started adding oil.

Now, I was quite familiar with the term "dipstick", but nobody had told me to check the fill level by the dipstick. So, into the small (144 CID) in-line six-cylinder engine I added quart after quart after quart of motor oil - until my neighbor came over and asked what in the world I was doing filling my car's little engine with all that oil.

Fortunately, disaster was averted. I re-drained the oil before turning the key with an overfull crankcase.

Still, I meant well. And, my mechanical instincts were spot on. Oil is really important. In an internal combustion engine, the lubrication that oil provides gives protection against the damages caused by friction.

Without oil, it doesn't take long before valves stick. Piston rings scrape against cylinder walls. Heads warp. Finally, the main bearings seize, and the engine stops. That's what happens in the absence of oil.

This morning - and for the next couple of weeks - we are going to consider the oil that is required if the parts and the whole of our church are to run right.

There can be friction in the church and there can be heat. That's not surprising because churches are made up of people. We all have sharp edges that can cut and slice. And we can all, sometimes, be pretty sandpapery. Without some oil coursing through our relationships, the unavoidable friction will result in increased heat and untold damage.¹

Ministries will suffer. Service will falter. Groups will turn into cliques. Worship will become lifeless. The church will seize. We need oil. And the oil we need is love.

Currently, the Care Group that Kathy and I are a part of is studying J.I. Packer's classic book, Knowing God. Written in 1973, Packer felt himself woefully inadequate for the task he had given himself - to write a book about God.

¹ In engines the damage is called "thermal breakdown."

So, the first sentence of the Foreword to Knowing God - a very wonderful book - reflects that sense of inadequacy. It reads, *“As clowns yearn to play Hamlet, so I have wanted to write a treatise on God.”*

In the same spirit I say, *“As clowns yearn to play Hamlet, so I am going to preach about love.”* Right. Dave is going to preach about love. I, who have so far to go, am going to talk to you about love.

Now the fact that I have far to go in my longing to love as Jesus calls me to love doesn't drive me to despair. And if you also have a long way to go to love as Jesus wants you to love, you shouldn't be despairing, discouraged, or depressed, either.

The greatest command God ever gave is to love. First, love Him; second, love the people He has created. It only stands to reason that throughout our lives we will sometimes fail to love well. To love is a tough assignment.

And progress on the road to loving well may well be slow. We may stall or even go backwards at times. But growth in love is very possible as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, as we learn from the example of Jesus, and as we study the most powerful three hundred words found anywhere in literature about love.

Those words are found in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. And before we get to them, I'll take a minute or two to set the context in which they appear.

Introduction: The Great Hymn to Love

Getting Acquainted with 1 Corinthians - an “occasional book”

1 Corinthians is what we call an “occasional” letter. It was “occasioned” by stuff that was going on in the church.²

² Paul, an apostle, brought the full weight of his apostolic office to bear on the church's life, addressing problem issues, rebuking sinful patterns, and giving instruction on matters of Christian living.

Paul had traveled to Corinth on his second missionary journey (recorded in Acts 18), and what he found there was a desperately needy city.

Corinth had a world-wide and well-earned reputation for sexual license and for idolatry. The Corinthians were notorious for practicing what the Bible calls sin.

But breakthroughs came as Paul proclaimed the life-changing gospel of Jesus. People were saved. Lives were changed. God's power and love impacted Corinth and a church was established, (~AD 52.)

A couple of years later, while he was in the city of Ephesus (see 1 Corinthians 16:8), Paul heard that there were problems in Corinth. The church was struggling.

So, since he had a deep concern for his friends in the church there, he sat down to write the letter we call 1 Corinthians to address those struggles.³ And did they ever struggle!

The church was dividing into factions, based on which church leader had baptized them. Paul reminded them that who baptized them was irrelevant. The important thing was the Jesus who saved them.

They refused to identify sin as sin. They tolerated a man who was having a sexual relationship with his father's wife. Paul told them to remove this man from their fellowship **[5:5]...for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.**

They were evidently taking each other to court to settle legal disputes. So (chapter 6), Paul urged them to solve problems internally, in the church, without using the secular court for the sake of their Christian testimony.⁴

³ He probably dictated to an amanuensis/secretary.

⁴ Paul wanted them to know that their Christian testimony before people who were far from God was more important than whether they won or lost at court.

And, of course, as sexual sins abounded in the city of Corinth, the church was not immune to those problems, either. Paul called them to holiness. He told them to stop visiting temple prostitutes.

He also gave them good and godly advice on, among other matters, marriage and singleness (chapter 7), Christian liberty and legalism (chapter 8), and the Lord's Supper (chapter 11).

Spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians (Chapters 12-14)

After he had spoken to all of these problem areas, he next addressed spiritual gifts and their exercise in the church.

Using the image of the human body, Paul told them that the church works the way it is supposed to when each member contributes his or her own unique "something," a ministry, a service that only he or she can provide through the Holy Spirit's gifting.

In a nutshell, that's what 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 are all about. Church "works" when everybody serves, everybody contributes, everybody prays.

And then Paul stuck chapter thirteen between chapters twelve and fourteen. If you take out the final line of chapter 12 and then skip over to chapter fourteen, it reads seamlessly.⁵

So...why insert chapter thirteen?

It is not required if we are to understand spiritual gifts. It was inserted for something other than instruction. 1 Corinthians 13 was written to provide the oil that dissipates relational heat. It gives us the key that can reduce the damage done when Christians have friction with each other.

⁵ Because of the exalted nature of the prose, some have questioned whether or not this chapter existed prior to the writing of the letter to the Corinthians. Perhaps, but that would neither detract from its inspiration or impact, as it "fits" perfectly with the context of the chapter. There is no need to question Paul's authorship.

Paul calls what he's about to address **[12:31b] a still more excellent way**. It is the way of love.

The "meat" of the spiritual gifts sandwich (1 Corinthians 13)

For centuries, readers have marveled at the beauty of 1 Corinthians 13. Many have called it the greatest, strongest, deepest thing Paul ever wrote.⁶

Most everyone who reads it places it among the finest passages in all of literature.

So it is popular to take phrases from the chapter and make them suitable for framing. You can go into stores - Christian bookstores and elsewhere - and find wooden plaques with this or that phrase from 1 Corinthians 13 stenciled or calligraphied.

Everybody admires the words. But today, you and I are out for more than admiration of great thoughts. We are seeking the impact that the Holy Spirit can have on us as we expose ourselves to the sharp two-edged sword of the Spirit.

So beginning today and continuing over the next two Sundays, we're going to work our way through Paul's call to love.

We will all find ourselves brought face to face with love's importance and with our own shortcomings to love as we are called to love. We'll get a vision of a life marked by love and will hear God invite us to give love to others as we have received love from Him.

Now, let's remember the context. Paul is writing to answer the question, *"How does the Body of Christ work?"*

Answer: The Body of Christ works as it was designed to work when every one of us is exercising gifts given by the Holy Spirit in ministries over which Jesus reigns and through which God's power flows.

⁶ Chapter 13 divides into three sections. Verses 1-3 describe the qualitative superiority of love as over against anything else we might think of; verses 4-8a give us a description of love; and verses 8b-13 detail the lasting value of love.

But just as a perfectly built internal combustion engine quickly runs into problems without oil, perfectly gifted Christians in a church quickly run into problems without love.

For instance, as I continue to speak, let's consider the potential problems associated with speaking.

Love - Better Than the Best Speech (v. 1)

What Kind of Speech is Paul Speaking About?

[1a] If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels...

When a member of the First Church at Corinth read those words, or when he heard them read out loud in a worship service, he would have thought of impressive speech: eloquent speech-giving, the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, or the phenomenon known as glossolalia ("ecstatic speech").

The Apostle Paul never claimed to be a powerful speaker. In fact, when the Corinthians assessed his speech as "*contemptible*" (2 Corinthians 10:10), he agreed with them.

They, on the other hand, had reputations as eloquent speakers. They studied dialectic and philosophy and poetry. Evidently Paul couldn't hold a candle to them when it came to turning a phrase or word choice or diction.

And, the Corinthians practiced tongues-speaking.⁷ In this letter, Paul told them how and in what settings they were free to do so. Today scholars debate whether the tongues-speaking referred to here is the same thing that occurred at Pentecost, where believers were given the ability to speak in a known language they had never studied or if this was ecstatic speech (glossolalia).

⁷ Surely, some members of the Corinthian church didn't speak in tongues in any sense (Paul did, though, according to 1 Corinthians 14:18).

But in ways they would have completely understood, they excelled in the "*tongues of men and of angels*".⁸

Paul's got us thinking about someone who communicates powerfully - either through human eloquence or supernatural inspiration. Now, we come to the punchline of the first verse.

What is Paul Saying to ME?

Without love...

[1] If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become as a noisy gong⁹ or a clanging cymbal.¹⁰

Notice that Paul's not pointing fingers. Not, "*If somebody...*" and not, "*If you...*" This is intensely personal. "*If I...*"

And that's the way I should read it, too. And you, too.

You should recognize that it's a funny thing to be giving a sermon on a passage where the point is that speaking can be pointless and powerless. But, it is true. Even if I was to give a good or a great sermon, if I delivered it without love it would be nothing but noise.

And it is altogether possible to put together a talk, a devotional, a sermon, and neglect love. I know. Been there, done that. And whenever it happens it is an ugly tragedy.

⁸ It has been argued persuasively that the Corinthians' view of spirituality had a lot to do with their sense that they had entered into the realm of angels. This would explain their rejection of a sexual life (7:1-7; 11:2-16) and their denial of a future bodily existence (15:12, 35). Hence the high value placed on this gift of "angelic speech."

⁹ To be "a noisy gong" was a proverbial expression for an empty talker in the first century.

¹⁰ The church at Corinth had shown itself capable of speaking in tongues AND at the same time tolerating, even endorsing, illicit sexuality, greed, and idolatry.

Love, actually...

So what does Paul mean when he uses the word, “**love**” here?

You and I use the term in different ways today, depending on context and setting. We’d like to know what is the sense of the word as Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 13.

The Greek word that we translate “**love**” in 1 Corinthians 13 is the word *agape* (αγαπη). Frankly, it’s a weird word and it was not one that was commonly used until the writing of the New Testament.¹¹

The two far more common words for love were *eros* (ερος - which speaks of romantic, sensual love) and *philos* (φιλος - the love of a friend).

But the New Testament authors wanted to say something new about the love of God they had come to know in Jesus. So, they high-jacked *agape* and invested that word with the meaning they intended.

Agape love is sacrificial love. *Agape* loves in the face of opposition and despite hardship. *Agape* seeks God’s best for someone. This is the kind of love Paul is picturing for us in 1 Corinthians 13.

Here is how the Apostle John says it - **[1 John 4:10] In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation** (the atoning sacrifice) **for our sins.**

Jesus gave us the best possible picture of what love is. And what did He do to show us love? He actively sought God’s best for us, even to the point of giving up His life. That’s love.

Whatever else this love may be, what Paul is describing is not an abstraction. It is the ultimate concrete commodity.

And love was given the ultimate tangible expression when Jesus gave His life as a sacrifice on the cross.

Love is a way of life that imitates Jesus. To “have love” for someone doesn’t mean that you think loving thoughts about them. It means that you act lovingly toward them.

In Paul’s day, Greeks highly esteemed intellectual horsepower. Military might was all important to the Roman. And the Jews delighted in God’s mighty works of power.

So how did Paul land on the superiority of and the surpassing value of and the beauty of love?

Well, it’s obvious in the Old Testament to those with ears to hear. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses wrote that God’s people were to LOVE the Lord with all their heart and with all their mind and with all their strength. And the theme of love for others - in the form of justice and mercy - is all over the Law and the Prophets.

Some have suggested that Paul “got” the primacy of love because of interactions he may have had with Jesus. He might have actually known Jesus, and if he didn’t know Him, he sure would have known *of* Him before his Damascus Road encounter.

Paul would have likely been in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ death and might have watched Him die on the cross. If so, that explains where Paul got the idea that love was so important.

And he certainly tasted the power of love...
 ...when he was rescued from an assassination plot by the Christians in Damascus he had only days earlier been trying to kill;
 ...when Barnabas risked his own safety to welcome Paul into the fellowship in Jerusalem (Acts 9);
 ...when he experienced the rich warmth of Christian community for the first time in the city of Antioch (Acts 12-13).

By whatever means, Paul put more weight on love than on eloquence or ecstatic speech.

¹¹ The brilliant Greek scholar, A.T. Robertson, was not certain that *agape* ever appeared before the writing of the LXX or perhaps before the New Testament. If it was used prior to and outside of biblical contexts, it rarely was. The content of the word has been defined by the biblical authors.

Today, we might be tempted to put primary emphasis on our ability to elucidate, enunciate, articulate and pontificate. (Did that sound kinda neat?)

But, here's the thing. While clear communication is very important, absent love, saying all the right things or saying things in just the right way isn't worth squat.

So, let's all of us remember to add the essential ingredient of love...
when we're giving a sermon;
when we're serving at VBS Monday - Thursday;
when we're teaching a children's Sunday School class, or a class for the youth, or an ABF;
when we're speaking to our friends or to our family.

Love is crucial.

And then Paul moves on to speak of other things we might think of as being really, really important.

Love - Better Than Prophecy and Knowledge and Faith (v. 2)

[2a] If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains...

The Power of Prophecy

He first mentions the gift of prophecy. It is the prophet who speaks to people on behalf of God.¹²

Picture someone opening the Word of God, explaining it, and then exhorting God's people to bend their lives to it. When that happens, the creative and life-transforming power of God is unleashed. That's what happens when someone speaks prophetically. It's a powerful moment.

¹² By contrast the priest speaks to God on behalf of people.

The Value of Knowledge

Closely tied to prophecy is the gift of knowledge. This is a special ability to assimilate and to community God's truth. Knowledge was revered in the church at Corinth and it is revered and affirmed in San Antonio churches today.

Here, Paul suggests a person who knows all mysteries. This Christian understands Christian doctrine and theology. Nothing is mysterious to him. She's got whatever mysteries may remain for other people all figured out.

This Christian has grasped the essential truth of the Trinity, understands the work of Christ's atonement, and "gets" how Jews and Gentiles are united in one body in Jesus. He knows. She knows.

People who have knowledge and have the ability to pass on that knowledge are highly esteemed, and rightly so.

And then Paul goes on to mention another important spiritual gift: mountain-moving faith.¹³

The Importance of Faith

This is not the faith that brings a person into a saving relationship with Jesus. This is the spiritual gift of faith, a capacity to trust God for miraculous things - and then to see them actually happen.

This is the gift of wonder-working faith.

From beginning to end, the Bible extols faith as a cardinal virtue. In fact, according to Hebrews 11, it is impossible to please God without faith.¹⁴

¹³ Paul is likely alluding to Jesus' comments about mountain-moving faith, but not from the Gospels, as the Gospels hadn't been written yet.

¹⁴ Abraham's willingness to offer his son, Isaac, on the altar on Mount Moriah is praised as an act of supreme faith in God's promises. (See Hebrews 11:6)

In the Gospels, the faith of a person with a disease is an important factor in Jesus' healing. The faith of the miracle-workers was an integral ingredient in the signs and wonders performed in the book of Acts.

Throughout my years as a Christian, I have certainly come to appreciate the importance of faith. Trusting God is critical in that moment by moment dependency and in crisis moments of pleading for God to do something awesome.

In no sense have I "arrived" when it comes to trusting God fully. But I am convinced - as you are, too - that faith is vitally important in God's economy.

But, in God's economy, a prophetic gift + encyclopedic knowledge of the ways of God + mountain-moving faith - love = 0.

Prophecy + Knowledge + Faith - Love = 0

[2] If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If somebody came to Northwest on a Sunday morning and presented a message from the Bible with a polished eloquence that rang true; if he preached passionately and accurately, with footnotes in the manuscript reflecting the latest scholarly research; if his sermon was a masterpiece of irrefutable argument and contained challenges to change...but neither his message nor his life was marked by love, his words might benefit the church, but he's nothing.

If a woman, gifted with a capacity to trust God in remarkable ways, regularly prays prayers that would make others blush - for the salvation of individuals or the repentance of cities - and sees God do it, if she sees God respond to her faith with astounding answers...but she doesn't love, others may be blessed, but she's nothing.

Even if we were to meet someone possessing all three gifts - prophecy (1 Thess. 5:19-20; 1 Cor. 14:1-25), knowledge (1 Cor. 1:5; 8:1) and faith (1 Cor. 12:9) - who didn't love, that gifting would not make up for the deficit caused by lovelessness.

A lack of love is tough to get around. Without love, the most gifted, knowledgeable, faithful person in the world is nothing.

And one more thing...

Love Is Better Than Generosity and Sacrifice (v. 3)

[3a] And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned...

The Beauty of Benevolence and Self-Sacrifice

Here, Paul wants us to think about philanthropy, benevolence, charity, and even self-sacrifice. We get images in our minds of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett giving away billions to help the poor. We remember stories of martyrs giving their lives for others or for God.

And while helping the poor and self-sacrifice are beautiful things, these acts do not, in and of themselves, define love. Paul can picture such acts of sacrifice being done without love.

The Bankruptcy of Love-less Benevolence and Self-Sacrifice

[3] And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned,¹⁵ but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

It's like an ad you might find on Craig's list for a car, "1995 Chevy truck. Good tires. Sans engine."

¹⁵ Some commentators believe that Paul was referencing a well-known act of self-emulation, recorded in these words, "Zarmano-chegas, an Indian from Bargaosa, according to the traditional customs of the Indians, made himself immortal and lies here." (Barclay, op. cit. p. 132)

In other words, it's a great truck, except that it doesn't run. It looks good sitting in the driveway, but don't expect it to take you to the grocery store when you need food. There's no motor in it and it's useless for the purpose for which you would buy a truck.

That's benevolence when it's not sourced in and motivated by love.

Taking a good, hard look at 1 Corinthians 13 will do something to you. It has done something to me and I'm praying that it will do something to you, too.

This week, this passage has alerted me as to how far I have to go to be loving. Like on Thursday morning...

On Thursday morning I was busy in my study when I became aware that there were people in the building, out in the foyer.

Here is where I'm going to tell you something that I'd honestly rather you not know.

I was put out for having my concentration broken and my work interrupted by people who had come to the church seeking food assistance. Now make no mistake about this - I love our food pantry ministry and I thank God that by your generosity we are able to provide food to people who are hungry. But I was impatient.

What's worse is that I was put out when what I was doing when they showed up was preparing a sermon on 1 Corinthians 13.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit quickly helped me realize the absurdity of having a bad attitude toward hungry people while studying love. I repented and ended up having a great visit and a prayer time with these folks.

But I'm mindful of where I was first drawn to go. Selfish with my time. Grasping at my privacy. Hoping to be able to give groceries without giving attention and lavishing honor.

I have so far to go.

I have also been challenged to expand my understanding of love beyond "*behaving in loving ways.*"

Now I do think that this is a big part of what love is. And yes, love is a verb. But 1 Corinthians 13:3 tells me that it is possible to DO loving things - giving, sacrificing - without being very loving about it.

Noble sufferings, philanthropy, and personal sacrifice do not, in and of themselves, define love. Love is a choice to bring God's blessings to another person, to be sure; but it is not a grudging choice. There is a certain willingness, even an eagerness about it.

Look again at the example of Jesus. The Lord did shudder at the horror of the cross when He was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. But He was still unalterably committed to bringing salvation to men, women, boys and girls, by His death.

His heart was in that sacrifice. He did what He did because He loved us.

1 Corinthians 3 challenges me to realize that even when I am giving and serving, even when I am making decisions to promote another's best interests I may still not be loving. I may be resentful. I may be giving because of guilt. I may be doing what I'm doing to be noticed by others.

That's not love.

None of us should be surprised that we come up short of the command to love. Love is life's most challenging assignment and love is God's most radical command. To love is the single greatest thing we can do.

And today, God's word challenges us to live (ACTION) so as to bring God's blessings to those we know *and* to move beyond simply "doing" so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we are transformed (INTERNAL CHANGE) into people who willingly, authentically, joyfully love.