

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

September 14, 2025

Ryan D. Johnson

Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress**

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

#### **Love – A More Excellent Way**

(1 Corinthians 13)

Study #17

#### **Introduction: The goal of our life in Christ**

Since we started on this journey through Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians back in May, Pastor Dave has taken us through Paul’s handling of the many issues faced by the 1st century Corinthian church. Factions and divisions that emerged surrounding different teachers, practices regarding food sacrificed to idols, worship practices, sexual immorality. They were a Church in Progress, as are we here at Northwest, 2000 years later. So we look to 1 Corinthians for wisdom in how we as a church, both collectively and individually, can take next steps with Jesus. We desire that so much, that it’s our mission statement.

We help you take next steps with Jesus... so that you can help others take next steps with Jesus. When we do, we do so with the intention that we are becoming more like Jesus in the process. When we look at Jesus, we can’t do so without the pervasive power of love in view. Indeed God’s love is at the very core of the Gospel, it’s what Jesus did when He died for us, and it’s what we should do for others. With that in view the goal of life in Christ is that we would become powerfully loving people, like Jesus was.

It was with that specific goal in mind that the Elders started the initiative that we’ve called “Next Steps Development.” These are resources focused on spiritual growth and helping us each to become the man or woman Jesus redeemed us to be. We launched with a series

of large group meetings in January, and that framework has been included in several small group settings since.

The bible has plenty to say about love, and we look to three passages in particular to support the belief that the goal of life in Christ is that we would become powerfully loving people, like Jesus was.

First, from Jesus Himself, quoting the Great Commandment in Luke 10:27 to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. And second, Jesus says:

***[Jhn 13:34 NASB95] 34 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.***

And finally, we read about the supremacy of love as reflected in 1 Corinthians 13. It is this chapter, that we will focus our attention on today.

We’re currently in the section of the letter that addresses the gathering of Christians, the worship service. In Chapter 12 Paul addresses spiritual gifts and their use among the Corinthian church, a gift driven church who had fell into arguments and factions about which gifts were greater, disrupting their community and their worship.

After his illustration of the diversity of different gifts being used like different parts of the body, he ends 12 with an encouragement to earnestly desire the greater gifts, and a teaser – that he’ll show them a more excellent way.

What follows is Paul’s superlative text on love. No doubt some of the most recognizable verses in the bible, just go to any Christian wedding for example. The text in front of us today is some of the most acclaimed literature on love.

I’d like us to hear the full chapter, starting at the end of chapter 12, to keep the broader view in mind before we dive in deeper. I know many of you have read and heard these verses many times. Fill in the blank Love is patient, love is.... Kind...

A challenge then this morning is to clear our minds, picture ourselves in the first century, pretty proud of the spiritual gifts you've been blessed with by the Holy Spirit. After all, your incredible generosity is much more impactful than when Henry interrupts the service speaking in tongues. Imagine you're hearing Paul's words, this letter, for the first time.

### **The Supremacy of Love (1 Corinthians 13)**

***[1Co 12:31 NASB95] 31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.***

***[1Co 13:1-13 NASB95] 1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed [the poor,] and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.***

***4 Love is patient, love is kind [and] is not jealous; love does not brag [and] is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong [suffered,] 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.***

***8 Love never fails; but if [there are gifts of] prophecy, they will be done away; if [there are] tongues, they will cease; if [there is] knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. 13 But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.***

### **Spiritual Gifts Without Love (vv. 1-3)**

Perhaps you noticed three distinct parts to this chapter? Let's dive into the first, and let Paul show us a more excellent way.

***[1Co 13:1 NASB95] 1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.***

To be fair, speaking in any language, sometimes even English is not a gift I have, let alone the eloquent speech in different earthly languages, or ecstatic speech known as glossolalia. So while the Corinthians sure knew what Paul was talking about, being well practiced in tongues-speaking themselves, for me this describes a gifting at an incredible level.

And I appreciate the insight to be gained with the instrumental analogy here. The gong, and the cymbal, as instruments, function to simply make noise. Just as our piano was functioning when my kids, as toddlers, would enthusiastically smash the keys. The purpose of these instruments, however, is to produce beautiful music. Paul is telling us that it is possible for a spiritual gift to function. But it takes love to fulfill its purpose. Take love away, and the result is that I am just noisy, empty, not fulfilling the purpose for which God has blessed me with this gift.

***[1Co 13:2 NASB95] 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.***

Note the word "all" in this description – all mysteries, all knowledge, all faith. Paul isn't describing some rookie Christian with a little bit of faith, or some knowledge, he's not leaving anything on the table. And Paul could have made an incredible argument if he'd have only said "if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." That's still a very strong statement. Not strong enough apparently, since he adds to it – all mysteries, all knowledge, all faith. It's compounding. Not only does this person demonstrate his or her spiritual gift to the fullest, but they have many! And yet, without love, I can have prophecy, AND knowledge, AND faith, and still, I am nothing.

**[1Co 13:3 NASB95] 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed [the poor;] and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.**

This is an image of radical generosity, and supreme sacrifice. Spoiler here, without love, the result is the same. It profits me nothing.

These illustrations paint a picture of the greatest manifestation of spiritual gifts, and drives home very clearly, that love is at the center of it all. It's an incredible contrast - the greatest manifestation of spiritual gifts, with the least impact - nothing. Not diminished, not reduced. Leaving out love as the critical component here, results in nothing.

We saw back in Chapter 12 verse 6 when it comes to exercising spiritual gifts that God is responsible for the results. He is the one changing lives. So when I say the result is nothing, I'm talking about the impact on *you*, the giver, not necessarily those on the receiving end. I become a noisy gong or clanging cymbal... I am nothing... it profits ME nothing.

Another observation we can make is that it is possible to be generous, to prophecy, to have knowledge, etc... in an unloving way. We know, as believers in Christ, that the Holy Spirit has given us a gift, but it's possible to exercise those gifts without love, in a dysfunctional way.

One might argue that inevitably it could or would still be a blessing, so why is love so critical? Let's think about generosity as an example. If I make a generous financial gift to a brother or sister in need, though not out of love, that person is still blessed by a met need, right?

In general, sure. But let's think more about the impact of my generosity. When I give out of love, there's an inherent energy, there's encouragement, there's blessing, genuine relationship building - a tangible transfer of these between BOTH of us, the giver, and the receiver. We both feel loved.

And when I don't give out of love? It's evident - the receiver may feel like a burden, a charity case, maybe even chastised. Perhaps there is an unwritten expectation of reciprocity. It can be so self-evident that you might refuse acceptance. You would rather continue to suffer, than accept a gift not rooted in love.

There is a very real consequence to the impact of my lack of love. One more consideration, let's look at Jesus' own words in John 13:35 following the New Commandment:

**[Jhn 13:34-35 NASB95] 34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."**

Jesus didn't say all men will know that you are My disciples by your prophecies, or your tongues, or your knowledge, or your teaching, or your service, or your generosity, or your healing.... No, they will know you by your love for one another. The definitive mark of a follower of Jesus is love.

### **The Definition of Love (vv. 4-7)**

Let's continue into the middle of the chapter, where Paul defines for us what love is, and is not, what love does, and does not. The word love used here is translated from the ancient Greek word agape. While it would be a worthwhile investment of our time to do a word study on agape, we'll have to save that for another time.

For a bit of brief context, the ancient Greeks had four different words we could translate to love.

Phileo speaks of a deep friendship and partnership, a brotherly love.

Storge refers to family love, like between a parent and child.

Eros speaks of romantic, sensual love.

And finally, agape is the word Paul uses in all cases throughout Chapter 13. Let's hear how he defines it in the second section.

***[1Co 13:4 NASB95] 4 Love is patient, love is kind [and] is not jealous;***

Paul begins with what love IS, and highlights only two things here. How simple! Yet, how can something so simple be so hard to live out well? What he describes here are not emotions or feelings, rather these words reflect how love can be seen in action.

Patience – your version might say longsuffering or suffers long. It endures a long time, even when suffering hardship. Love doesn't lose heart while bearing the offenses and injuries of others.

Love is kind. Pretty straightforward there I think. It acts benevolently towards others, caring, and compassionate. When we have, and show, God's love, it can be seen in the simple acts of kindness. Friendliness, helpfulness, generous, considerate.

What follows are 8 things that love is NOT. Let's run through those rather briefly, knowing we could spend an entire Sunday on each one.

***[1Co 13:4-7 NASB95] 4 Love is patient, love is kind [and] is not jealous; love does not brag [and] is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong [suffered,] 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.***

Love is not jealous. We're thinking envy here, a serious sin. Envy is what murdered Abel, enslaved Joseph, and put Jesus on the cross.

Love does not brag, or boast, or parade itself around. Love doesn't need the limelight, the recognition, or to show off. Love gives because it loves to give. Serves because it loves to serve.

Love is not arrogant. I like the King James translation – is not puffed up, like someone focused on themselves rather than others. It's not proud.

Does not act unbecomingly, or behave rudely, disgracefully, dishonoring to others.

Love does not seek its own. This reminds me of Jesus in a most basic way – an others centered person. Someone who does not demand his or her own way, never seeking their own benefit.

Love is not provoked. Easily angered, or irritable. Love doesn't go around just looking for a fight.

Love doesn't take into account a wrong suffered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Remember when Peter asked Jesus how many times to forgive a brother who sinned against him? Up to 7? Jesus responded, 70 times 7, conveying that forgiveness should be limitless, without counting. So it ought to be to with love.

Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth. It does not delight in evil, injustice, wrongdoing. Love wants the best for others, and so doesn't celebrate in their demise.

***[1Co 13:7-8 NASB95] 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails;***

Love bears all things. In the midst of hardship, of opposition, we are called to still walk lovingly.

Believes all things, not in a childish, or gullible sort of way, but rather by choosing to believe the best in others.

Hopes all things – love has confidence in the future, it hopes for the best, it hopes in God.

Endures all things – indeed, the greatness of Agape love is it doesn't give up.

What a high bar that's presented here for each of these – all things. We might be able to endure some things all the time. Maybe even all things for some time. If I'm being honest with myself, I tend to be more of a some things some of the time kind of a guy.

Verse 8 sums it up well, love never fails. That's not to say your act of love will always result in what you want, or desire. We all know

that, have our own stories of loving someone only to be bitterly disappointed in the result. But it does mean that love is not defeated by the failure of our friends, or the attacks of our enemies. It withstands all assaults.

Despite the immediate outcome, with love, God can use your spiritual gift, your act of love to impart great blessing, to make beautiful music, to produce tremendous character and shape who you are in Christ, profit you with eternal reward in heaven. It is always the right time for love, love is always an appropriate response. Nothing done in love is ever in vain.

These 4 verses are the very definition of agape love. Is anyone else at least a little intimidated by such a high bar? Ok... beyond intimidated like me? On one hand, we know that this is a bar we just won't clear will we? But on the other, aren't we so thankful that we are loved this way by Jesus? It's a radical kind of love isn't it? Of course it is – agape, the same word used in John 3:16:

***[Jhn 3:16 NASB95] 16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.***

Yes, it's that kind of love. The kind that Jesus calls us to in Luke 6:27 – to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. It was counter-intuitive, and counterculture 2,000 years ago, and it is today.

We look to Jesus as our example, so let's replace the word love with His name. Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. Jesus does not seek His own or take into account a wrong suffered. He fits, doesn't He? If our goal is to be more like Jesus, let's use agape love as a diagnostic for our own Christian lives.

Insert your own name. When we do, we get a sense of the change that Paul challenges us with – by the Holy Spirit to change into the loving disciples of Jesus we were meant to be.

Ryan is patient, Ryan is kind. He is not provoked, Ryan bears all things, endures all things... I'm not off to a good start. For a long time, I really did think I was a patient man. And then I had kids. Turns

out, not so much. And then we had foster kids. Friends, I will humbly accept your prayers for patience in my life. I have a long way to go in love.

### **The Permanence of Love (vv. 8-12)**

So far we've seen that spiritual gifts need love to be fully impactful, and a much better understanding of what agape love is, and is not. For those in the Corinthian church that still might be tempted to hold their gifts with a tight fist, higher than love, Paul goes on to make 2 more points in verses 8-10 that gifts are temporary and partial, whereas love is enduring, eternal, and whole.

***[1Co 13:8-10 NASB95] 8 Love never fails; but if [there are gifts of] prophecy, they will be done away; if [there are] tongues, they will cease; if [there is] knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.***

Even the greatest prophet, speaking to the people on God's behalf has but a fragmented glimpse of the whole truth. And there will be a time, when that glimpse, that partial, is done away – when the perfect comes. It's clear to me here that Paul is talking about the 2nd coming of Jesus. At that time, spiritual gifts are no longer needed. If a prophet is one who speaks to people on God's behalf, what use is there for prophecy when we will be in God's unyielding presence?

Think of your spiritual gift as a candle, a powerful light in a dark and broken world. But in the shining presence of our Lord, the light from that candle is effectively pointless. The gifts of the Holy Spirit will ultimately be overshadowed by the immediate presence of Jesus.

***[1Co 13:11 NASB95] 11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.***

Completely appropriate to act like a child when you are indeed a child. Spiritual gifts are appropriate for our present time. But there will be a time when we grow up, and abandon our childish ways. So, in

the context of spiritual gifts, I'm not at all suggesting that spiritual gifts are childish, or they go away with one's own spiritual maturity.

Rather, Paul says that if we are spiritually mature, we will not over-emphasize spiritual gifts, especially at the expense of love. True maturity is knowing love is the main thing. Let's look at the second illustration.

***[1Co 13:12 NASB95] 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.***

The 1st century mirror was polished metal, often bronze in Corinth. Nothing like what we have and expect today. Though they reflected the truth of an image, it was dim, dark, blurry, unclear. That's how we see now. But then – when the perfect comes – no mirror, but face to face. No room for distortion. We shall see Him as He is we read in 1 John 3:2. I will know God as perfectly as I am able to, in the unhindered, unrestricted, unmitigated, unveiled, unobstructed presence of our Lord.

### **Love – The Greatest (vv. 13)**

***[1Co 13:13 NASB95] 13 But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.***

These three words in the Christian life are so critical. Often described as fundamental, foundational. Pillars, or planks of life in Christ. Three principle graces, or virtues, emphasized throughout the New Testament.

Faith - This is simply the posture of trust we assume toward our God. Believing what God says. This is you and I, trusting God as He reveals Himself to be, relying on Him daily, counting on Him to provide for us as He knows is best.

Hope - As long as we live here and for all eternity we will thrive by placing our hopes for the future in God.

Love – the agape kind as we've been focusing on today. A self-giving love, without demand for reciprocity. Self-denial for the sake of another.

These three abide. They remain. They last forever. They carry an inherent permanence, when prophecy, tongues, knowledge, etc. are done away, these three stand firm.

Paul puts a stake in the ground, claiming love is the greatest here. Why? Because it encompasses the other two. As we were reading the definition, love believes all things. So that is encompassed in love. Love hopes all things, so faith and hope are both encompassed by love. Love being the ends, the other two the means.

Love is also the greatest because it is an attribute of God

***[1Jo 4:8 NASB95] 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.***

God is love, and will always be love, hence, love is the greater of these Christian graces.

So we see Paul exhorting the church in Corinth to love. The Holy Spirit has blessed you with incredible and precious gifts. Wonderful. Fantastic. They were never meant to be the focus or goal of our Christian lives. Rather, our goal is to become more powerfully loving people, like Jesus.

### **Conclusion:**

As we reflect on our personal journey in Christ, Paul reminds us that motives matter. We know that there are a great many perfectly good and wonderful things to dedicate ourselves to and focus on the life of Christ (ministry, service, generosity, teaching, family, spouse, job). But love reigns supreme.

As for me, I don't want to be a noisy gong. When people see me, I pray that they see a glimpse of Jesus. I want my actions to count/matter for Jesus. If I'm being generous of my time, my resources, my energy, I don't want it to be empty. Or to parade around in a mask for the accolades and affections and acceptance of my peers.

Not that my own faith supports this thought... but I don't want to move a mountain, or surrender my body to be burned, only to hear Jesus ask – but where was the love?

We are called to radically love. Love God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. Love one another, even as Jesus has loved you.

Radical love isn't just reserved for the “big” things in life – for moving mountains, or extreme acts of sacrifice, or generosity. How might you put love at the foundation of the little things? The everyday things, infusing love in our everyday lives.

As we wrap up today, I encourage you to prayerfully consider how you can more fully live out agape love in your everyday life. With reflection, find an aspect of your life that can use some more love – maybe an area of service or focus, church, work, school, home. Maybe it's a person, a relationship that needs a little more patience.

Let's start there and pray that the Lord would increase our ability to love each other well, as Christ has loved us.