

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>8</sup> Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. <sup>12</sup> Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. <sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

In the name of our loving Savior, dear friends in Christ,

Do you feel like you're at a wedding this morning with all this talk of love and love songs and the words of 1 Corinthians 13 before us? Raise your hand if 1 Corinthians 13 was a reading or the sermon text for your wedding—or if you want it to be someday! It was actually the sermon text for Debbie and me on a beautiful June day back in 1993. When we think of these words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians, we might think of them as the classic wedding text because they are used so often.

But some of you know that this was not written as instruction for a husband and a wife. Paul wasn't even remotely talking about or thinking about marriage when he wrote this! He had been writing about spiritual gifts, how the Holy Spirit has given believers talents useful for God's kingdom. He had explained that the body of believers is like a human body in that, as each part of the human body is important and has special, useful functions, so it is with every person in the body of Christ, the Church. And then he says, **"And now I will show you the *most excellent way*."** These words about love directly follow. So today we examine this most excellent way to find out how important love is.

### HOW IMPORTANT IS LOVE?

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| 1. It is a command of Jesus                             | (Gospel reading) |
| 2. Lack of love negates the greatest of spiritual gifts | (1-3)            |
| 3. Look at all the good things love is!                 | (4-12)           |
| 4. Love is the greatest                                 | (13)             |

If you want to know how important love is, the place to start is to remember that love for other people is something that Jesus commands! On the night that our Savior was betrayed by Judas—after Judas left that upper room where Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover—Jesus gave a command to his followers. After telling them that he would be leaving them, he said: **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35)."**

It is God's will that his holy and dearly loved people show love to others. It is not optional; it is what your Savior wants from you. Jesus showed perfect love to others and he is the standard of love for each Christian to emulate!

Why does Jesus command this for Christians? It promotes the unity we enjoy as God's people AND it is a witness to others! All people will be able to look at us and see the love we have and live and they will know that we are Jesus' disciples. If you're looking for an example of that, some of you who were around at the time our congregation hired church consultants to help us evaluate our ministry and set a course for our future, will remember something they told us. After they had interviewed each of our members and put together a report, they presented it and one of the things they said to us was, *"You guys actually love each other!"* The Christian love you have for your family of believers here at Grace was obvious as you shared your thoughts and feelings! What a blessing it is when Christians take seriously this command of Jesus to love one another! It is good for us, pleasing to God and a positive witness to those around us.

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The love we show to others is obviously important to Jesus. It is so important that he says that a lack of love actually negates all sorts of good things we do—even the greatest of spiritual gifts given to us by God! In the previous chapter, Paul ran down a list of impressive talents and abilities given by the Holy Spirit—preaching, healing, speaking languages never learned before, the ability to do miracles even! And then Paul says, **"And now I will show you the most excellent way." If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.**

You see, even a person with great trust or incredible knowledge or the most charitable, benevolent person or someone willing to die for what they believe ARE nothing and HAVE nothing if they are unloving! Before God, the person without godly love is nothing. If you know anything about God and his desire for people, you know that he has always wanted our hearts. Instead of creating robots that would automatically do what he says, God created man and woman with hearts and minds, made in such a way that they could show their love for God with their lives. When God warns about the things that anger him, that separate us from him, he speaks not only of things that we *do*, but he also talks about where sin originates: in the heart and mind. In the same way, a person can DO any of these great things, but if their heart isn't right, it doesn't matter because God searches our hearts—and he wants to see love—a love for others that comes from faith and motivates us to do good things and use the spiritual gifts he gives to us.

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Okay, so Jesus commands that we love others. Even our spiritual gifts are pointless without love. But what exactly IS love? Well, let's look at how God describes it. Let's look at all the good things love is and does. **Love is patient, love is kind. It does not**

**envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.**

The Greek language has several words for love. This one is “*agape*.” This is the kind of love that God shows. When you hear the gospel message “**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)**” that’s *agape* love. This love is an unearned, self-sacrificing love, a love that gives up for others. You can see how that love describes God—the Father was willing to give up his Son; Jesus was willing to give himself on the cross. It is this kind of love that God wants you to show to others. You and I are to give things up for others, even showing love to the undeserving.

And God describes just how we are to do this. We are to be patient with people. We are to be kind—that means helpful and friendly. We aren’t to be self-obsessed and think overly highly of ourselves. There’s no room for boasting and sinful pride and being rude. If we are loving, we aren’t touchy and irritable and we don’t keep score of how many times and all the different ways others have wronged us. The Christian who loves with an *agape* love shows that what God says elsewhere is true—**Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8)**. But godly love doesn’t just avoid the bad things, it *does* good things! This love rejoices in the truth—it delights in what is true, what God says. It is protective and trusting and hopeful—always!

You may say, “*Yeah, I have those qualities. I’m a loving person.*” But notice that we are to be loving *always*. You might be the proverbial “nicest person in the world,” but you’re not perfectly loving like God is. None of us is! But the perfect God expects us to be! That’s how he is and that’s how he expects us to be. And here’s the truth—Satan and hell await those who do not live a perfect life of love as Paul describes here. It is totally justifiable that the perfectly loving God would send us away from his presence and into hell for eternity when we die because you and I, no matter how nice we think we are, do not show perfect love to God and others.

But the God of perfect love didn’t want that! So great is his love for sinners that instead he sent his only Son to pay the penalty for their sins on the cross. Not one person deserved the love of Jesus—his life lived for us, his suffering in our place, or his death. Jesus’ willingness to die for sinners is the greatest self-sacrificing love this world has ever witnessed. It is *agape* love to the divine extreme! It is love shown to people who didn’t deserve it and had no right to expect it. **THIS** is what love is and it is this kind of love you and I are to mimic in our lives as we interact with each other. When we receive the forgiveness Jesus lovingly earned for us, we look at this description of godly love again to see how to show love back to God and to each other.

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Paul tells us that everything in this world will pass away—prophecy, preaching, knowledge—but godly love, a love like that described in these words, a love like God’s love, will last into eternity! If you want to know where love ranks, how important it is, that tells you! Paul even lists the big three, the triple gift of the Spirit: Faith, Hope and Love. Faith in Jesus is all-important—you can read the great faith chapter of the Bible, Hebrews 11 to see that. Hope in God’s promises of release from this world and eternal salvation is all-important—you can read about hope in Romans 8. But 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, tells you that love is the greatest of all! Perhaps we find our answer to why God considers it the most important thing in 1 John 4:8 which says plainly, **God is love.**

You don’t need a wedding to talk about love; it is something that God would have us talk about regularly and understand well. Christians need to know that love is the most important thing and live it! A love like God has *modeled* for us in Christ and *given* to us by the Holy Spirit and *described* for us in detail in his Word is what God wants from his people. It is an exercise of faith. Trust in the forgiveness given to you by the love of Christ and respond by making every effort to put sinful, unloving ways behind you and by living this godly love. Amen.

**Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.**