

INTRODUCTION

I started out intending to preach only two messages from 1 Corinthians 13, but I got bogged down and preached three messages on the first seven verses of 1 Corinthians 13, as we talked about the distinction between God's love and self love. Tonight we come to 1 Corinthians 13:8, and we will complete this beautiful chapter on love. Love is the most used and perhaps the most abused word in the English language. Our problem is in the fact that in the English language we only have that one word L-O-V-E to describe all different kinds of feelings and all different kinds of emotions.

In college, I discovered the hard way when I said to some girls who were friends, "I love you," and I meant it in a "I-love-you-as-a-sister-in-the-Lord" way. They didn't quite understand what I was saying and it caused some really hard feelings and disrupted relationships. Why? Because in Greek, the language in which the New Testament of the Bible was written, they had a good word for brotherly or sisterly love: *phileo*. We only have that one word—"love." They had another word that meant romantic love, *eras*. They had another word for love that meant you have affection toward an inanimate object, like "I love ice cream" or "I love the Dallas Cowboys football." (forget that) Or "I love Tyler, Texas" or "I love America." They had another word for patriotic love, *storge*. Then there was a special word in the Bible meaning a divine, unselfish kind of love and, of course, you know that the word is *agape*. I believe the reason the King James translators in 1611 used the word *charity* instead of love when they translated chapter 13 was because they were trying to make a distinction between the common, ordinary English word *love* and the Bible word *love*. I think that has probably confused more people. This word in 1 Corinthians 13, is real love! That's why we have to have all kinds of qualifiers, because this is talking about perfect love and so many times we are talking about some other kind of feeling of affection. The context of this is spiritual gifts and we will get back into that in a couple of weeks.

1 Corinthians 13:1-7. "If I speak in 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. 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. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when PERFECTION* comes, the imperfect disappears. 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. Now we see through 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. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

* The literal word there is the word *the perfect*.

Why is Paul putting such a great emphasis on the importance of *agape* love? The church at Corinth was located within a morally corrupt society. It was the worst society you could imagine—worse than what we would call the French Quarter of New Orleans. Immorality was rampant. There was a byword used in biblical times, where you would take the word, *Corinth*, and make a verb out of it and you spoke of “corinthisizing” someone. To corinthisize someone meant to take a moral person and despoil them, introduce them to an immoral lifestyle. Anywhere in the Roman Empire you took a good person and despoiled them, the word they used was corinthisized! That’s how morally corrupt this place was. Paul tells this little church in Corinth, “More important than anything else, you have to have *agape* love.” We’re going to see as Paul completes this dissertation on love, he makes four observations on the limits of love, actually I could say the “unlimits” of Love, because love is basically unlimited.

I. LOVE IS MORE PERMANENT THAN SPIRITUAL GIFTS

First, Paul says love is more permanent than spiritual gifts. He mentions three of the most visible spiritual gifts. He says, “Where there are prophecies, they are going to cease. Where there are tongues, they are going to be stilled. Where there is knowledge, it is also going to cease.” What are those three things, tongues, prophecy (preaching) and knowledge? Those are some of the spiritual gifts—at least eighteen—mentioned in the New Testament.

We’re going to talk a lot more about the gift of speaking in tongues when we get into chapter 14. Paul compares the gift of speaking in tongues with the gift of prophecy. But the point of chapter 13 is not to give a dissertation on tongues and prophecy. All he is saying is, “Prophecy as great a spiritual gift as tongues, and as great and misunderstood spiritual gift as knowledge, and as valuable a spiritual gift as they are, all of those are only temporary. The time is going to come when those spiritual gifts won’t even exist. The Bible teaches that every believer, every born again Christian has at least one spiritual gift. God has given you a supernatural ability to minister within the body in the church. But spiritual gifts are to operate within the church and the time is going to come when the church as we know it now will no longer exist; when the time comes that we are taken to heaven, whether by death or by the rapture of the church, in heaven there will be no need for spiritual gifts. Ten billion years from now, I suspect someone will say, “Prophecy? what’s that?” “Tongues? what’s that?” “Knowledge? What’s that?” But love will still be in existence. Paul says love is never going to end. Love is interwoven into the character of God. I John 4:8, says, “God is love.” There are only several of those definitive statements about God in the Bible. “God is Spirit.” “God is Life.” “God is Love.” That means love is tied into the character of God and is just as permanent and just as eternal as is the nature of the character of God. It *doesn’t* say spiritual gifts are God and God is spiritual gifts. They are temporary. Because love is permanent, God shows us what true love is. People will know you are a Christian not by your spiritual gifts, but by the love you show to one another.

II. LOVE IS THE BEST MARK OF MATURITY

The second statement Paul makes is, “Love is the best mark of maturity.” Verse 9 says, “Right now we only have a temporary, imperfect understanding of God and of spiritual truth but when Jesus comes and we see him whether we die and go to heaven or he comes to receive the church unto himself when we see him, we are going to know completely.” Paul is also saying when it

comes to love, it’s like different ages. Look at verse 11. “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child and I reasoned like a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” You could take that verse and apply it to a lot of different spiritual truths maturing. In this context, he talking about love and I think the best mark of maturity in a Christian is love.

When you were a child, you did things differently. Did you notice as you grew up, you moved on to different things? I remember when I had a tricycle. Some of my earliest memories are of riding my tricycle up and down the sidewalk in front of our house in South Alabama. But I’ll never forget the Christmas tree when there was a little two-wheeled bicycle with training wheels under the tree—and it was mine! I never even looked at the tricycle again. From that point on I said, “Only *babies* ride tricycles.” Then the time came when I didn’t need training wheels and I put them and never thought about them again, and any time I saw somebody riding a bicycle with training wheels, I said, “That’s a baby! When I was a child, I did that!” Then the time came when I was old enough to drive a car and I didn’t have anything to do with a bicycle again. As you move up and as you mature, you forget about things of the past.

There is a part of childhood that is admirable—a child-like spirit. Jesus said to adults, “Unless you become as a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.” There are some attributes of being child-like we all ought to emulate: humility, simplicity and basic trust. But let’s face it—there is a side of being a child you wouldn’t call child-like, you would call it *childish*. Childishness can be described as selfishness. When I was a child, I was the center of the universe. My testimony is different from a lot of people’s testimonies, because I became a Christian when I was nine years old and there was not a whole backlog of sin in my life at that age. I hadn’t robbed any banks, I hadn’t done drugs, I hadn’t gotten drunk, I never killed anybody...but I was a sinner, because I was self-centered and selfishness is the essence of sin. That’s how you describe a child, that bad part of their nature, selfishness. Paul says, “When I was a child, that’s the way I thought selfishness but when I became a man, I began to act more mature.” Love does not say, “What do I want?” or “What’s best for me?” but “What do you want?” and “What’s best for you?”

2 Thessalonians, 1:3. It says, “We ought to always thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.” If you are growing as a Christian, you have a greater, wider, deeper love for other people today than you did last year, than you did five years ago. When somebody looks at you now, can they say you are more mature in your love for other people? Paul says childishness is self-centeredness. So, don’t think or talk like a child anymore. Let love be seen in your life.

III. LOVE IS PERFECTED WHEN WE SEE JESUS

The third statement Paul makes about love is, “Love is perfected when we see Jesus.” He is saying, “Right now everything we perceive is incomplete, but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is imperfect (meaning our lack of understanding) will be passed away.” He says, “Right now we are looking through a glass unclearly, but then we will see him face to face.” That’s an interesting term there especially if you know the background. Verse 12 says, “Now, we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror.” In ancient Rome, more mirrors were

produced in Corinth than any other city, because of the content of the sand in that area, they were the best mirrors in the Roman Empire. Even by our standards today, the mirrors they made back then were very, very crude. They could not produce very clear, clean glass. There were all kinds of imperfections in it. Most of us grew up with very, very clear mirrors and when you look in a mirror, you pretty much get a good reflection of what you are looking at, but in biblical times that was not so. The glass was distorted and you could barely tell who the person was. You could only get a very vague reflection in a mirror. That’s why Paul is saying. “Right now our understanding of truth is like looking into one of our mirrors. But when we see Jesus face to face, everything will be clear.”

Then he makes an amazing statement in the last part of verse 12. “Now I only know in part, but then I shall know fully even as I am right now fully known.” Right now we cannot truly comprehend the height, depth and width of love, because everything we understand spiritually is clouded by our own humanity, by our own lack of understanding—but when we see Jesus, we will know everything even as we are known right now. God knows you perfectly right now! He knows everything about you. He knows you better than you know yourself. The truth is, you don’t know God nearly as well as He knows you. The good news is one day you are going to know him as well and as intimately as he knows you right now! Everything I know about God right now is clouded by my lack of understanding, because my brain cannot comprehend, it just overloads and runs out of memory space when I try to think about the greatness and the majesty of God. I just can’t see it. I can only catch a dim reflection—but when I see Jesus face to face, I will know even as I am known.

Have you ever heard anybody say, “There are a bunch of questions that I can’t wait to ask the Lord when I get there?” In John 16:23, Jesus says, “When you see me, you’ll ask me nothing.” You won’t need to. You’ll know even as you are known. The time is going to come when you will know everything. This is the promise in I John 3:2. “Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” We can’t even comprehend what love is right now—but when we see Jesus, it will be perfected.

IV. LOVE IS THE GREATEST SPIRITUAL GRACE

The final thing the apostle Paul says about *agape* is “love is the greatest spiritual grace.” We’ve already seen it is more permanent than spiritual gifts but we also see it is the *greatest* spiritual grace. Verse 13 says, “And now these three remain.” Remain from what? Remain from where? The word literally is *abide*, which means these three things above all the other spiritual graces hang in there. They linger. They demand our attention. Paul says, “There is love, there is hope and there is faith. Now remains faith, hope and love. But the greatest one of these is love.”

Let’s talk about all three of those. As you know, faith is our belief in God. It is our trust in God. Faith is something you exercised in the past or you wouldn’t be here tonight. You had to exercise faith and put your trust in God to be saved. Hopefully right now you are walking by faith, living by faith—it’s something that is constant. But it’s something you exercise. Hope, on the other hand, is expectation of the future. It’s looking forward to what’s going to take place with optimistic expectations. But love energizes faith, because if you didn’t have love for God and

you didn't know God loves you, you wouldn't put your faith in him. If you didn't love God and you didn't know that God loves you, there would be nothing to hope for. That's why Paul says, "Of all three of those, love is the greatest."

Notice how all three of these spiritual graces faith, hope and love appear in 1 Thessalonians 1:3. "We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." "The work produced" is the word meaning ministry. In other words, because we put our faith in the Lord and because we believe he loves us, believe he died for us, believe he was buried and resurrected because we believe, that we serve him. "The labor prompted by your love" is a different word than ministry. It's a word that means "a continual working out," not something we do but something love does *through* us. Then he says hope produces patience endurance. You need all three: faith, hope and love—but of all the three he says, "Love is the greatest."

If love is not applied or not practiced, it's totally worthless. I'll never forget the first time I got a blistering sunburn. I was in high school and we had a day off due to the death of the governor. It was a state holiday. Some friends and I went out on Lake Jackson and we skied and swam all day long from sunup to sundown. Of course, the only thing I wore was a pair of cutoff jeans all day. I didn't notice it, but I was getting terribly blistered! Around midnight I realized something was wrong. I started hurting. I was so miserable, I couldn't even sleep that night. The sunburn was so bad, some of the skin on my thighs and shoulders shriveled up and shrank and I could hardly straighten my legs out. I had never been sunburned that badly. The tragic thing about it is I didn't get a bit of sympathy from my family. When I didn't go to school the next day, I didn't get a bit of sympathy from the principal, who happened to be my football coach. He didn't excuse my absence that day. I couldn't understand why, because I had never hurt more than I was hurting that day. Do you know why it was un-excused and why my family didn't give me any sympathy? They said I was downright stupid, because I had a bottle of suntan lotion (Coppertone is about all they had back then) in a bag in the boat and all the protection I ever needed was right there but the problem was I never applied it.

Love is the same way. You can learn all you want to about love. You can analyze it. You can criticize it. You can synthesize it. But until you apply it and practice it, you are just plain stupid according to the word of God. Can you honestly say you have *agape* love toward every brother and sister in Christ? Is there anybody the Holy Spirit brings to your mind that you have a lack of love toward or have an imperfect love toward? Maybe you are harboring bitterness or resentment or a grudge toward that person. I know you can't hate them. It's a sin to hate. I'm just asking, "Who do you NOT love?" Is it someone who maybe gets a new car and a week later they dent the fender and you snicker, because you are rather happy about it? Then you don't love them. Are you secretly pleased when someone stands up to sing a song in church or something and they forget the words or they embarrass themselves? ("They got what they deserved.") Then you don't love them. Does it boil your blood when anyone gets any kind of recognition or any kind of credit? When the telephone rings and you pick up the phone and hear it's for them, do you think, "Oh no!" Is there anybody you have a lack of love for? Jesus said, "It's by this that all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another." The Bible says, "To him that knows to do good and does it not to him it is sin."

I know I am looking into the faces of a lot of good people—people who love Jesus enough to come out on a Sunday night and go to church. You may not be an adulterer. You may not have cheated on your income tax but if you do not have *agape* love toward any brother or sister in Christ, regardless of their race, regardless of their place, regardless of their face—then there is sin in your life which you need to deal with. God will not bless Green Acres Baptist Church until we really have a genuine, authentic, transparent love for one another. It could be your attitude of bitterness, unforgiveness, a lack of love that may be hindering some of God’s blessings.

I shared a story with my Sunday School Class several years ago about something that happened in Texas. It must have been in 1972 or 1973 when a friend of mine was a student at Southwestern Seminary. I did not go there, but he was attending seminary in Ft. Worth and he told me this story years later. He was pasturing a little church in West Texas, but because he was one of the outstanding students in evangelism in the seminary, he was invited to preach a revival in one of the churches in Ft. Worth. It was a fairly large church, (at least for him) running three or four hundred in Sunday School. Because he was an outstanding evangelism student, they invited him to preach a week-long revival at this church, and it had an unusual schedule. It was a revival that started on Monday night and was going to go through, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, skipping Saturday night and have a prayer meeting on Sunday. I was to end after the Sunday morning service. My friend said he prayed and prepared and got as close to the Lord as he thought he had ever been in his life. And he went in on Monday night and preached. There was a good crowd—but nothing happened. He preached on Tuesday night and nothing much happened. Wednesday night...Thursday night...Friday night...and there was not one decision in that service. He said there seemed to be an atmosphere of restraint in that he couldn’t put his finger on.

After preaching all week with nothing happening, my friend said on he was burdened with guilt, because he thought it was his fault. He stayed up almost all Friday night on his face before the Lord and said, “Lord, is it me? Is there something I haven’t done? Is it something I *have* done? Why aren’t you blessing these services? What’s wrong with this church?” On Saturday morning, he was at the church offices (and you know church offices on a Saturday morning is usually a deserted place) in the Pastor’s Study doing a little studying, when he heard some voices in the hall. He went out into the hall to get a drink of water and around the corner were two ladies talking. They didn’t know he was there. One of them said to the other one “Did you know?” And his ears perked up. She said, “Did you know that so-and-so (and she gave the name) who was the President of the WMU of that church (the mission organization for women) “Did you know that the President of the WMU hates the Chairman of the Deacons in our church?”

“NO! I didn’t know that!”

“It’s true!”

“Why, she won’t even bow her head and close her eyes when that guy prays in church!”

“Noooooo!”

“Don’t tell anybody!”

“Oh, I won’t.”

“It’s a secret.”

You know a secret is? What you only tell one person at a time. My friend said he immediately knew what was wrong in that church. There were two leaders, the President of the WMU and the Chairman of the Deacons, that didn’t love each other. He didn’t know why, he just knew that

was the problem.

They didn't have services on Saturday evening. But Sunday morning church was packed. He stood on the platform with the Pastor and he didn't know why he did it, but he said, "Pastor. Would you mind calling on the Chairman of the Deacons to pray the offertory prayer?" The pastor said, "Sure." So he called the Chairman of the Deacons up to the pulpit to pray the offertory prayer. And this Chairman of the Deacons began to pray and the Bible says to "watch and pray" so he sneaked a look around, and sure enough there was a dignified, silver-haired lady standing there with her arms crossed, her head up, and her eyes wide open—refusing to bow her head when "that scoundrel" prayed. My friend said he bowed his head and prayed that the Lord would help them, because he didn't know what to do. He said he didn't know why he did it—and still doesn't halfway believe he did it—but he said he was preaching along and he said he just kind of threw it in. It didn't have anything to do with his topic or anything. He said, "Why, I even know of one church where the President of the WMU won't even bow her head and close her eyes when the Chairman of the Deacons prays." And he just kept on preaching! He just stuck it in there, almost like a subliminal message. People probably thought, "Did he say what I thought he just said?" It didn't have anything to do with his message, he just threw it in there. Well he preached and gave the invitation. The Pastor stood down front and they sang and they sang and they sang and nobody came forward. Nothing happened. The service was over. The revival—if you wanted to call it a revival—was over. The Pastor prayed the closing prayer and walked to the back door to greet people as they left.

As everybody was leaving and the choir was filing out, my friend was standing on the front platform feeling pretty low. He heard a commotion and looked up—there literally running down the aisle with tears in her eyes, was that lady, the President of the WMU. He said she just about tackled the Chairman of the Deacons at the front of the church in an embrace. She said, "Brother I am so sorry. Will you forgive me, because I haven't loved you?" It's never 100% anybody's fault, and the Chairman of the Deacons said, "Sister I'm sorry. It's my fault. Forgive me for what I did or what I said," and they just got it right, right there in the front of the church hugging and weeping. My friend said he stood there and watched and all of this was taking place in just a matter of a few seconds. Then he looked over and saw two men who began to embrace and confess a lack of love toward each other when they saw these two getting right. Further over to the side there were two women who saw what happened between the Chairman of the Deacons and the President of the WMU and they began to embrace and get right! He said just those three couples but there was such a commotion that as people were filing out of the church they stopped and turned around to see what was going on. Everybody immediately knew what was happening, because they all knew about that torn relationship.

The Pastor was standing there at the front door and suddenly there was nobody there to shake his hand. So he walks back in to investigate and he sees what's going on and he knows what's happening. He realized that finally a revival had broken out in his church after the services were over. So the pastor, who must have been very sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, said, "Folks. Let's open the invitation again and sing, 'Just As I Am' and if anybody would like to come and give their life to Jesus, they can come." My friend said when they re-opened the invitation, eight people were saved that morning and many people got right with God!

That's a testimony of what can happen when two believers who have not loved each other make it right with each other. John says, "You cannot say you love God if you don't love your brother." Do you really love? Has the Holy Spirit brought anybody to your mind you have a lack of love for? If so I want to encourage you to go to that person and ask them to forgive you for a lack of love and then begin to show *agape* love toward them. It doesn't matter how good your faith is; it doesn't matter how good your hope is—it's how do you love, that really matters!

OUTLINE

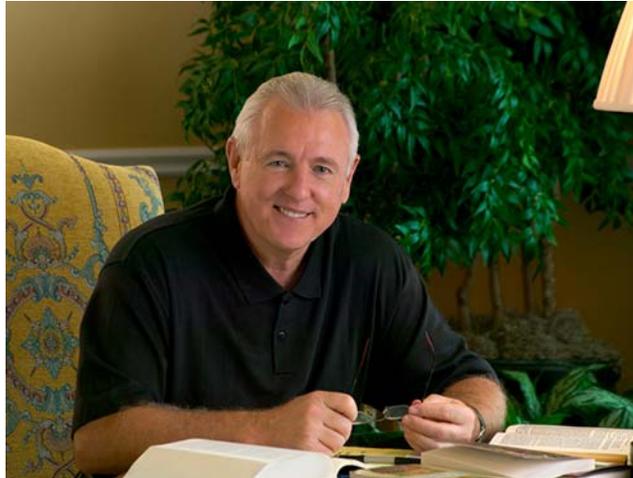
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IV. THE GREATEST SPIRITUAL GRACE



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes