12-18-22

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Last week during our advent celebration we lit the candle of joy, and so, that was the topic of the sermon. This week we have lit the candle of peace. But two weeks ago, Will was filling in for me and he did a sermon on peace. So, I’m going to go back and do a sermon on love.

First Corinthians 13 is a very well-known chapter in the Bible, and is frequently referred to as the “love chapter”. One of the reasons for its popularity is because it is read very often at weddings. There is nothing wrong with this; I usually read it at weddings I officiate. The description of love given in this chapter is a good goal for a husband and wife to try to attain.

Another reason it is so popular is because, in one form or another, it hangs on the walls of homes as decoration and reminder. Perhaps a painting or photo with some of these words written on it; perhaps some other form of framed work describing love with the words of this chapter. Again, there is nothing wrong with this; there is one hanging on the wall in my living room.

The thing is, that these uses barely scratch the surface of what Paul is talking about in this chapter. As part of the body of Christ, we need to have a fuller understanding of what is going on here. The love Paul is describing is more than emotion, is more than good feeling and a good way to live in a home. There is much more here than we can cover in a single sermon, but we can go just a little deeper than the common uses for this Scripture.

One of the main things for us to keep in mind is context. This chapter will stand alone and that’s how it is usually used. But to fully understand what Paul is saying, we must consider everything around this chapter; we must consider the context. Keep in mind that when Paul wrote this, there were no chapter and verse divisions like we have now. These divisions are very helpful to us as long as we remember that the letter is a unit; we must be careful with pulling sections out by themselves.

First, this letter to the Corinthians is to a church, to a body of believers. And there are problems in the church. Secondly, the wider consideration in this section of the letter is worship. Next, the chapters that immediately surround chapter 13 have to do with spiritual gifts. And then, our reading today focuses on love; love within those surrounding ideas.

Paul founded the church at Corinth. The book of Acts lets us know that he spent 18 months there building the Corinthian church. This was unusual, because most places he went threw him out after only a short time. While there, the church was also helped by the knowledgeable Jewish Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila. Even after these three left, God’s providence sent the orator Apollos to them. The church at Corinth had an exceptional beginning, built on a good Gospel foundation.

It serves as a warning to us that they went very far off track. They allowed false teachers to come in and even allowed them to chip away at the good foundation laid by the apostle. They had divided into factions, which led to squabbling among themselves which threated to break up the church. They went so far as to sue each other in civil court. The rich did not share with the poor in the Lord’s supper and actually made a mockery of the meal instituted by our Lord Jesus. Those that had spiritual gifts were using them to gain prestige in the church.

Factions, infighting, maneuvering for power and attention, class wars, people not loving each other: all the things we see in the carnal world. Unfortunately, what we often see in the local church. The world desperately wants to get into the church; all too often, the church lets it in. We must be so careful that we don’t do that here. How do we keep the world out? Love.

The public worship in the Corinthian church had some big problems: they were tolerating some pretty serious immorality; people had separated into clicks; the Lord’s supper had lost all its original meaning; and those who had spiritual gifts were using them for their own gain and prestige. Paul dealt with each of these, but here he is dealing with the spiritual gifts.

During the services, those who could speak in tongues were prattling on, often times with more than one talking at a time. Those who could prophesy would also talk whenever they felt the urge and so, they ended up talking over each other. There was obviously a power struggle between those with different gifts and even amongst those who held the same gift. There were arguments regarding which gift was greater. The whole thing led to a very disorganized worship service. Worst of all, God was not worshiped.

Before coming to chapter 13, Paul reminds the Corinthians that each gift is given by the Holy Spirit and its primary function is for the good of the church body. That holds true today. Each of us has a gift or gifts. Remember that a gift is something given, it is not something we earn or deserve. As a gift, and since it is given to us by God, we need to use it the way God wants us to.

While Paul is focusing on the supernatural gifts here, what he says include the gifts that most of us have; what we might call talents or things we are good at. Far too many use their God given talents strictly for their own gain. It is fine to use abilities God has given us for our own benefit or to earn a living; but they must also be used freely for the church. Our gifts and talents are to bring God glory and edify our brothers and sisters in Christ.

At the end of chapter 12, Paul tells us that it is fine to desire certain gifts or even what we might call greater gifts. The thing is that our motivation for desiring the gift must be right. It cannot be for our own gratification but for the good of God’s people. But at this point, Paul says, “*And I show you a still more excellent way.*”

No matter what supernatural gift or what talent you might have, love is more important. Paul makes it very clear that if you don’t have Christian love, any gift you have is worthless in the eyes of the church and of God. And although Christians are called to love all people, this letter is focusing on a church. We must keep in mind that what Paul is talking about here applies to us; each of us sitting here today and those who are here with us.

Let’s consider the love Paul is talking about in this chapter. It is the Greek word, agape. I think most of us are familiar with this word, but we need to consider it closely. The actual Greek word has a wider context than what we focus on in the New Testament. Firstly, agape is a self-sacrificing love. Notice that this description implies action. Agape love acts; it does things for others. It is focused on others. So, we are willing to go out of our way, to inconvenience ourselves, out of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Agape love changes the way we look at other Christians. We need to look at them the way God looks at them; see them through God’s eyes. And God sees them as someone He was willing to die for. He was willing to give up His own glory, suffer and die for each on sitting here today. That is the value and love God has for each of us and how we need to see each other.

Now we’ve many times heard, “Well, I have to love so-and-so, but I don’t have to like them.” I have said this myself. The thing is that we are on thin ice with this attitude. Agape isn’t just a cold decision; it’s not simply a state of the mind with no emotion involved. Imagine if we thought God just loved us coldly through divine decision rather than actually having warm feelings for us.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word agape is used throughout the Song of Solomon and few books have as much emotional feeling as that book. Also, in 2 Samuel 13 is the account of king David’s son, Amnon, who develops such strong feelings for his half-sister, Tamar, that he takes her by force. The word used to describe what he felt for her is agape. So, there is an emotional aspect to agape. As Christians, we are called to love other Christians and to develop kind feelings toward them, even if they are irritating.

Additionally, agape doesn’t mean permissive or anything goes. The phrase “tough love” seems to no longer be acceptable, but it is necessary when properly applied. There was a man in the Corinthian church who was romantically involved with his father’s wife. This is disgusting and Paul called the church out for tolerating it. God chastises those He loves. Parent’s must sometimes use the rod on the child. Unity in love in the church is vital, but it must never be at the expense of truth.

Notice that love is never called a gift of the Spirit; love is a fruit of the Spirit. While different Christians receive different gifts, love is something all Christians are to have and display. When we accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour, we receive the Holy Spirit. The indwelling Holy Spirit will develop love in us. But we must cooperate. If we plant a fruit tree, but then neglect it, it will not produce the fruit we hope for. In the same way we must not quench or resist the Holy Spirit in order to have the fruit.

In the first three verses, Paul goes through some very great gifts and shows how they are absolutely worthless without love. A cymbal crash at just the right time during a symphony performance adds majesty to the piece. But otherwise banging on metal is just noise and an offence to the ears. Speaking in tongues just because you can has the same effect.

Prophecy was a beautiful gift God gave to His people, but it was for His people’s benefit. If someone uses it in their own pride, people will not listen and it will not have its intended purpose. Jesus talked about faith being able to move a mountain, but moving a mountain without love is purposeless. Even sacrifice, no matter how great, is of no benefit if it is done without love.

There are some who have truly accepted Jesus as Saviour who will not develop love in this lifetime. These are the ones whose works are wood, hay, and stubble. When tested by fire, they will be burned up. They will make it into heaven as one might escape from a burning building, but they will have no treasure there.

Then there are those who depend on the gifts rather than Jesus. Jesus speaks of these in Matthew 7:21-23. *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’* How dangerous it is to go without love; we are commanded to love one another; that is the will of the Father. To go against this command is to practice lawlessness. It is the antichrist spirit.

Paul goes through a list of things that love is and that love is not. Neither list is a complete list of love’s attributes, but these were needed for the Corinthian church. Notice that each of the things Paul says that love is not, is exactly what the Corinthian church was doing. Many of these things are attributes of God Himself, which makes sense since God is love.

In spite of how impressive certain spiritual gifts and talents may be, verse 7 demonstrates the true strength of love. It is love that gives us the ability to deal with whatever life throws at us; that gives us the stamina to persevere in following Christ until we meet Him face to face. Love gives us the faith to believe in Jesus and depend on the sure hope that we are His. This love is the love He has for us, and that we have for each other through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Corinthian church clamored for spiritual gifts and the social high-standing they brought. But Paul makes a sobering point. All of these gifts are imperfect in this life; and, they will pass away. On the other hand, our love may be imperfect, but God’s love is not; and in the end perfect love will remain for eternity.

Prayer

Dear Lord, in this season of advent we think of Your coming to this earth. And we think of special emotions and states of mind that we have through You. You bring us peace with God the Father. You give us the sure hope of eternity with You. You bring us the joy of knowing that we are saved from destruction because You have paid our debt. And Lord Jesus, You bring us love.

In Your first advent, You demonstrated a love that had never before been seen on this earth. May You be glorified for coming in humility and then dying a humiliating death, all for we who are sinners and rebels against our Creator. And while You have paid for our sins, You still command us to live a holy life. You have shown us true love and give us the way to live in that love.

Lord, You know that we are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. We succumb to temptation and do not follow Your commands. Although we are to love others with the love You have for us, we are incapable. But You have mercifully given us the Holy Spirit, and by Him we may strive to be obedient to that call to love as You do.

Lord, You loved us while we were still Your enemies and You acted on that love. Help us to do the same.

In Your precious name

Amen