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Sermon Notes

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The Supremacy of Love over All Spiritual Gifts

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

We come this morning to perhaps the most famous chapter in the Bible. This chapter is read at more weddings than any other portion of scripture. And as I've had the privilege of officiating at many weddings, I have heard these words again and again. A long time ago, however, they ceased to be a piece of sweet romance poetry. I consider this chapter one of the toughest, most convicting, most relentlessly challenging set of verses in the entire Bible. These words work us over with great power... they put us through the ringer... as in the sense of the old time washing machines that my grandmother used over a hundred years ago... with the rough washboard that the launderer would use to rub the garment vigorously, and to plunge the dirty garment again and again into the basin of soapy water, and then scrub with great strength... and eventually to "go through the ringer" squeegeeing out all the soapy, dirty water... then the launderer would hold up the shirt or pants, shake her head, and plunge it again and scrub it again, and put it through the ringer again.

Every phrase in this brief chapter is designed by the Holy Spirit of God to put us all through that process. It is not designed to make any of us feel wonderful about how loving we are. Behind each of the phrases in this short chapter is a kind of death.

To follow Christ as his disciple means this:

Luke 9:23 Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Philippians 3:10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death

Basically, to love like this chapter commands means to DIE TO MYSELF constantly... that fleshly desire

I have said many times that as sinners, we are all fanatically committed to SELF. God has recently blessed Christi and I with a delightful little granddaughter... Sola Grace. She has a very pleasant demeanor for a newborn; she's very mild-mannered and doesn't really cry very much. But I can tell you, like all babies born in Adam since the fall, she is fanatically committed to self.

1 Corinthians 13 is a powerful remedy to that relentless bent. To learn how to love is to learn how to die

Look at the fifteen statements Paul makes about love:

1. Love is patient,
2. love is kind
3. love is not jealous;
4. love does not boast
5. love is not arrogant,
6. love does not act rudely;
7. love does not seek its own,
8. love is not easily provoked,
9. love does not keep a record of wrongs,
- 10.love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but
- 11.love does rejoice with the truth;
- 12.love bears all things,
- 13.love believes all things,
- 14.love hopes all things,
- 15.love endures all things

The flesh is relentlessly committed to the opposite of each of these...

The flesh is impatient, unkind, jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude. It most definitely seeks its own pleasure relentlessly. It is easily provoked, and it keeps a careful record of wrongs it has suffered. The flesh does not delight in the truth, but loves evil. It bears nothing, believes the worst about other people, has no hope in the relationship and gives up on people quickly.

Every single assertion in this piece of delightful wedding poetry calls us to spiritual warfare, and to spiritual death.

Like this text:

John 12:24 I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.

So, 1 Corinthians 13 calls us to die to self that we might live in Christ

To prove that, John Piper made these observations:

- Being long-suffering means dying to the desire for an untroubled life.
- Having no jealousy means dying to the desire for unshared affection.
- Not boasting means dying to the desire to call attention to our successes.
- Not acting unbecomingly means dying to the desire to express our freedom offensively.
- Not seeking our own way means dying to the dominance of our own preferences.
- Not being easily provoked means dying to the need for no frustrations.
- Not taking account of wrongs means dying to the desire for revenge.
- Bearing all things and enduring all things means dying to the desire to run away from the pain of obedience.

The good news of the gospel is that God knows we can never produce this death on our own... our salvation is a work of his grace from beginning to end... this is the very thing the cross of Christ is designed to do, the very work the indwelling Spirit was sent to do in us all.

So, for a number of weeks, we are going to walk through this amazing chapter.

Other than the Holy Spirit and the Apostle Paul, my guide will be Jonathan Edwards, who preached sixteen sermons from these thirteen verses in 1738. The revival at Northampton, MA, had begun four years earlier; the First Great Awakening was still a few years off. These sermons stood in between to point his local church to a daily life of godliness that is actually lived out in their homes, their town, their church. Sixteen sermons! Assembled into a single book called *Charity and its Fruits*... 368 pages!!

I do not intend so much detail, but it is well worth each of you buying and reading

I will be leaning on his insights again and again

I. Love is the Supreme Goal of Our Salvation

Edwards put it this way:

“All the virtues that is saving and that distinguishes true Christians from others is summed up in Christian love.”

“Notice what excellent things are being mentioned as worthless without love... the most excellent things that ever belonged to natural men... the most excellent privileges, and the most excellent performances.”

These things are speaking in tongues, prophesying, fathoming the deepest mysteries of the Christian faith, possessing all true

knowledge, laying down one's life as a martyr, giving all your worldly good for the poor and needy... these are some of the greatest privileges and performances in the whole of the human experience... but all are said to be worthless without love

If even these most excellent things are worthless without love, then love must truly be the sum and substance of our Christian religion

A. Two Greatest Commandments

Matthew 22:36-40 *Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"* ³⁷ *Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'* ³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment.* ³⁹ *And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* ⁴⁰ *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

B. Paul's Assertions

Romans 13:8-10 *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.* ⁹ *The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself."* ¹⁰ *Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

1 Timothy 1:5 *Now the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.*

Everything that Christian salvation works in the soul is ultimately summed up in this one issue... LOVE

Love for God above all else; but secondly, love for others...

1 Corinthians 13 is about this second love, horizontal – love for other human beings

C. What Is Love?

1. The same English word is used for many things

“I love my wife, I love our dog, I love my new suit, I love going to the beach, I love seafood, I love college football, I love chocolate chip ice cream, I love Jesus Christ my Savior.”

The same word!! I love chocolate chip ice cream, and I love Jesus?!

2. Greeks had different words

- a. Sexual love
- b. Brotherly affection
- c. Morally pure self-denying love

3. Edwards:

- a. Simple definition: that by which something is DEAR or PRECIOUS to another
- b. More deeply... *Treatise on Religious Affections*
 - i) Heart has two basic abilities: understanding, and affection
 - (i) To know something—its attributes, nature, etc.
 - (ii) To be attracted to that thing to a greater or less degree such as liking or loving; or to be repulsed from that thing to a greater or less degree, such as disliking or hating
 - ii) Heart attraction vs repulsion

4. When applied to human beings, as in this chapter, it has to do with heart disposition toward other people—affections, attractions

D. Love is the PINNACLE of the work of grace God seeks to do in our hearts

E. See the way Christ is exalted in the eyes of God the Father by what he loves and what he hates

Hebrews 1:9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.

F. Context in Corinthians

1. The Corinthians were esteeming the spiritual gifts themselves above each other
2. They were arrogant and fractious and hostile and angry and selfish
3. Some were boasting over their spiritual gifts as though they made them inherently superior to their brothers and sisters in Christ
4. 1 Corinthians 12: the body and its members

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Some were arrogant toward others, saying "I don't need you!"

Others were humiliated and felt they had no real role in the Body of Christ because their gifts were inferior... "Because I don't have this or that gift, I am not a member of the Body"

Paul has to show them the essential unity of the Body:

1 Corinthians 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

So, he must teach them the HEART ATTITUDE they should have toward one another as they use their gifts, because they were missing the whole point of spiritual gifts... EDIFYING ONE ANOTHER in Christ

So he introduces this glorious "love chapter" with these memorable words:

1 Corinthians 12:31 And now I will show you the most excellent way.

II. Tongues Without Love is Empty Noise

1 Corinthians 13:1 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.

- A. The Corinthians Were VERY PROUD of the Gift of Tongues
- B. Paul Shows Them How Vital Love is compared to the gift of tongues
- C. He uses EXTREME language in all these examples of spiritual gifts
 - 1. If = “Even though I might... “
 - 2. Even if I were to have the MOST EXCELLENT speaking gift ever
 - 3. He zeroes in on eloquence
 - a. Preachers are esteemed for their eloquence
 - b. Some have stood out in all Christian history for their speaking gifts

John Chrysostom, the Archbishop of Constantinople who lived from 347 to 407... his name literally means “golden mouthed”; esteemed all around the Christian world for his stunning eloquence in preaching

John Bunyan was an amazingly gifted preacher, despite the fact that he was a common laborer – a tinker (repairer of pots and pans) by trade;

When the great theologian John Owen was asked by the King of England, “Why do you go hear that tinker prattle?” Owen, the most learned of all the Puritans

"May it please your Majesty, if I could possess the tinker's abilities to grip men's hearts, I would gladly give in exchange all my learning."

George Whitefield was the most effective evangelistic preacher in church history... he was extremely eloquent; an actor named

Garrick who heard him preach said “He could move men to tears simply by pronouncing the word ‘Mesopotamia.’”

Charles Spurgeon: known as the “Prince of Preachers,” he had an astonishing facility with the English language; magnificent words flowed from him with stunning ease;

BUT he said this about eloquence:

“Let eloquence be flung to the dogs rather than souls be lost. What we want is to win souls. They are not won by flowery speeches.”

Eloquence... the tongues of men and of angels... is highly esteemed among human beings; but Spurgeon is right – souls are not saved by eloquence, but by the Spirit of God

Another great preacher was Robert Murray McCheyne, a man who moved thousands in Scotland to seek salvation through faith in Christ

But it was not his eloquence that saved souls... I read an account once of the true power of McCheyne

A young minister visited Dundee, Scotland, deeply concerned that his ministry had very few results. He decided to visit the scene where years before Robert Murray McCheyne had ministered in such evident power of the Spirit of God. McCheyne died at the age of 30, but not before he had moved Scotland towards God. The visitor asked the caretaker at the church if he could tell him the secret of the amazing influence of Robert McCheyne. The old man led the young minister inside the church to McCheyne’s study. “Sit down here,” he said. “Now put your elbows on the desk.” He did so. “Yes, that was they way McCheyne used to do it,” said the old man. “Now put your face in your hands.” The visitor obeyed. “Now let the tears flow! That was the way McCheyne used to do!”

D. Tongues without Love: WORTHLESS

1. Paul says: I would be a “Tinkling brass, a clanging gong” without love
2. A loud lifeless sound... like one of those gongs I’ve heard in a Buddhist temple—
3. Or one of those wind-up monkey dolls with cymbals that they repeatedly clang together
4. Tongues that do not flow from love are that worthless
5. Imagine someone getting up in the Corinthian congregation, filled with pride and self-focus, speaking in tongues better than anyone ever has before. He has no love for the congregation except what that congregation thinks of his performance.
6. It’s like a lifeless windchime, accomplishing nothing of eternal

E.

III. Prophecy and Knowledge Without Love Are Nothing

1 Corinthians 13:2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge... but have not love, I am nothing.

A. Prophecy is the Greatest of All Spiritual Gifts

1. Prophecy is the ability to speak the word of God directly by revelation from God through the prophet to the people
2. To be able to say, “Thus says the Lord...”
3. Though the Corinthians greatly esteemed tongues, Paul will make it plain in chapter 14 that prophecy is far greater
 - a. He will say that tongues that are not interpreted make no sense to those who hear them

- b. But anyone who speaks a word of prophecy is speaking directly from God and is able to expose the hearts of those who listen

1 Corinthians 14:23-25 So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? ²⁴ But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, ²⁵ and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

4. But

B. But a Prophet who Has No Love is NOTHING

1. Certainly a genuine prophecy from God always has value no matter who speaks it
2. Balaam's prophecies were true about the coming of a star in Jacob who would rule in the distant future... but Balaam himself was a corrupt person who was slaughtered because he enticed Israel to sin with the Moabite women worshiping the Baal of Peor
3. So also Caiaphas's prophecy about it being better for one man to die and the whole nation not perish was eerily true about Jesus... John said as High Priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jews and Gentiles as our atonement... but Caiaphas himself was a wicked man who was not rewarded for his words, however true they were
4. So it is with a prophet who has no love... he speaks true things from God, but he has not love... HE IS NOTHING

C. Paul Takes this Gift UP TO THE EXTREME

1. Not only if a prophet speaks God's words... but even if he can probe the deepest mysteries of the faith... he can "FATHOM ALL MYSTERIES"
2. Mystery is a word used frequently in the New Testament to speak of things that were ordained by God before the foundation of the

world but are now revealed to the human race; often they feel like mysteries because they surprise people and go beyond anything that anyone

3. Not only that, he possesses ALL KNOWLEDGE!
4. Paul speaks of an individual with the greatest prophetic gift in history—there is no theological question he cannot answer, nothing too difficult for him to understand
5. He is the wisest man in history; an oracle of knowledge that everyone in the world would seek out to speak with... like Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

1 Kings 10:3 Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her.

6. This is just MIND-BOGGLING! You would think such a person would be extremely valuable, worthy of a tremendous reward in heaven
7. It is vital to know things... to be able to answer the deepest questions of life

1 Timothy 3:15 the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth

8. BUT Paul says, even such an extraordinary person, if he has not love he is NOTHING!!
9. Effectively he already addressed this very same issue back in chapter 8

1 Corinthians 8:1-2 Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.

We want to be a church that KNOWS doctrine, that KNOWS the deepest mysteries of the faith, that can ANSWER the questions of life that everyone asks... but it must be combined with LOVE

IV. Faith Without Love is Nothing

1 Corinthians 13:2 if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

- A. This is the GIFT of Faith... as all of these are spiritual gifts
- B. The Gift of Faith is the ability to perceive what God is doing and be instrumental as a tool in bringing it about... BY PRAYER

Matthew 17:20 I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

- C. Like Elijah, when God wanted to bring a drought... then remove it... he did it through a MAN... through his faith and his prayers

James 5:17-18 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

1 Kings 17:1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

- D. So, a man or woman with a faith that can move mountains would be amazing... an extraordinary gift, astonishingly valuable... a “mover and shaker”, someone who changes history by his faith-filled prayers

Example: John Knox, the 16th century Scottish reformer... a fiery man, who prayed once “Give me Scotland, Lord, or I die!” He yearned to see the people of Scotland won to the genuine Reformed faith in Christ away from Catholic superstitions; his lifelong enemy was Mary, Queen of Scots... she said “I fear John Knox’s prayers more than all the assembled armies of Europe.”

- E. BUT Paul Says... even such a man or woman of faith is NOTHING if they have not love

V. Self-Sacrificial Generosity Without Love Gains Nothing

1 Corinthians 13:3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

A. This is the most extraordinary of all... the gift of giving, pushed to the absolute extreme

1. Here is an individual that actually did what Jesus asked of the rich young ruler... “Sell all that you possess and give to the poor”
2. That man balked and couldn’t do it
3. But here’s someone that actually DID... everything they owned on earth, given away for the poor
4. More than that... dying the death of a martyr... and not a quick death, but a slow, torturous agonizing death of being burned alive
5. The level of GIVING here is almost incalculable, immeasurable... everything he has on Earth he is giving away

B. BUT if he HAS NOT LOVE, he actually GAINS NOTHING

1. This is why I say this chapter is such a rough one, so vigorous with all of us
2. Paul is saying he “gains” nothing
 - a. Either, there are no actual gains for the Kingdom of God to loveless giving such as this
 - b. OR that the person himself or herself GAINS NO REWARD in heaven
 - c. I think it’s more likely the second
3. This is extremely difficult! Especially since we are told “Love is an action, not an emotion”
 - a. Couples “fall out of love” with each other and get a divorce... we Christians know that’s wrong
 - b. Also there are key verses on the ACTION side of love

1 John 3:16-18 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

James 2:15-17 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

c. That is TRUE... love inevitably produces ACTIONS... love can be measured in self-sacrifice

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

d. True love always results in sacrificial actions... that is true...

C. BUT 1 Corinthians 13 gives the other side of the equation... there has to be LOVE behind it... there is a heart aspect, an affection, a delight in the other person

2 Corinthians 9:7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

The Macedonians who gave to the poor in Judea did so out of the overflow of their heart affection for their fellow believers... they BEGGED for the chance to give; it brought them delight to give; that's why their giving was so wonderful

D. It is possible to give, even give a ton, and have no love at all... there could be a guilt manipulation side: "I hope you realize all that I have done for you." Or "Do you know how much this cost?" Or like the rich man laying out a feast, but only doing it BEGRUDGINGLY

Proverbs 23:6-8 Do not eat the food of a stingy man, do not crave his delicacies; ⁷ for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost. "Eat and drink," he says to you, but his heart is not with

you. ⁸ *You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments.*

- E. This is fundamental to love... that the person giving has to in some sense DELIGHT to give or it is not welcome; there has to be a heart connection

Jonathan Edwards: "In some sense the most benevolent, generous person in the world seeks his own happiness in doing good to others, because he places his happiness in their good. His mind is so enlarged as to take them, as it were, into himself. Thus, when they are happy, he feels it; he partakes with them, and is happy in their happiness. This is so far from being inconsistent with the freeness of beneficence that, on the contrary, free benevolence and kindness CONSIST IN IT."

John Piper: *Desiring God...* "dutiful roses"

F. Much Christian Teaching Counters This

1. That we should not expect to get anything out of our giving to others
2. That we should be "disinterested" in our benevolence; "For the Christian, happiness is never a goal to be pursued. It is always the unexpected surprise of a life of service."
3. BUT 1 Corinthians 13 implies that our hearts MUST be engaged, even delighted in the giving of our possessions to the poor; we must even be delighted to lay down our lives for others, because of the JOY SET BEFORE US of the good it will do them

G. So... how do these gifts get used "without love"?

1. How does someone speak with the tongue of men and of angels and HAVE NO LOVE?
2. How does someone have the gift of prophecy, with an ability to fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and HAVE NO LOVE?
3. How does someone give all they possess to the poor and surrender their body to the flames, and HAVE NO LOVE?

4. Love is a heart disposition... an attraction in the heart toward other people; a desire to do them good and see them blessed by the spiritual gift
5. It is described like this:

1 Corinthians 13:4-5 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

6. So, if the one speaking in tongues has no particular desire to bless his brothers and sister in Christ, and if the one prophesying is impatient and unkind to the ones he's speaking to, and if the one giving to the poor is RUDE and easily angered while serving them... such a person IS nothing and GAINS nothing for their service
7. It MATTERS what our heart's disposition is, and our demeanor... were we patient, kind, humble, and gentle while we used our gifts, or were we not?

VI. Applications

A. Come to Christ!!

1. We cannot love others until we have been transformed and saved by the love of God for us

1 John 3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

1 John 4:19 We love because he first loved us.

2. Feel the amazing love of Jesus Christ for you as a sinner... how he was delighted to die for you and me that our sins would be forgiven
3. He did it "for the joy that was set before him"... the joy of having you in heaven

B. Christians: Allow This Chapter to WORK YOU OVER!

1. The best way to read 1 Corinthians 13 is not as a piece of wedding poetry for a young couple to begin their lives together
2. It is for all Christians to be stripped and humbled and made low, that we might go as spiritual beggars and ask to be transformed
3. We need to realize how loveless we all naturally are
4. We need to let go of all pride in our spiritual gifts and achievements
5. We need to say, “Lord, would you please work in me a genuine love for others... a love for my brothers and sisters in Christ, a love for my neighbors, a love for the lost?” Would you change my heart of stone for a heart of love?
6. Go through each element of this love chapter with a heart of humble prayer... ask God to work each part in you

C. Be Hopeful!

1. God does not mean to hurt us but to heal us
2. The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write these words to a very imperfect church—the Corinthians—who needed to hear these things as much as any Christians who have ever lived
3. Paul introduced the topic with the word, “And now I will show you the most excellent way!”
4. Ask God to work this most excellent way in you!
5. Be filled with HOPE... you will spend eternity perfectly loving toward all other Christians, and they will all be perfectly loving toward you
6. Therefore, every step we make in that direction will be blessed by God