

## Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

This morning we come to probably one of the best known chapters in all of the Bible: the chapter on love. It is a beautiful chapter that is recognized by both believers and unbelievers alike as a model of what true love really is.

It is really hard to overstate just how important love is in the Christian life. Love is so central to the Christian life that it pervades absolutely everything we do. If we are known for anything at all in the world, we should be known for our God-honoring love toward one another.

Jesus says in **John 13:35**: By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Christians deeply loving other Christians is the hallmark of following Jesus. It's the dead giveaway that we have been saved by grace through faith.

And love is rightly our hallmark because the God who saved us, did so because he loved us. Why did he love us? Because love is who God is. God is love.

If you were asked to describe God in a sentence or two, what do you think you'd say? There's a lot we could say. We know his name - Yahweh - which means I am that I am. God is the eternally existing one. But what is he like? Here's how God describes himself:

**Ex. 34:6-7**: The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.

He says I am abounding in steadfast love. Abounding means to overflow.

I was at a restaurant the other day and I poured myself a cup of coffee and I got to talking and I filled it up too far and it started overflowing in onto the table. It abounded over the coffee cup.

When God says his love abounds, what he's saying is: imagine a little coffee cup and you pour a swimming pool of love into it. This is what it means for God to abound in love. He's not stingy or lacking in love. It gushes forth from him.

As odd as it may sound, God eternally loves himself. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Spirit, the Spirit loves the Father - round and round it goes. And that love, then, is poured on us from even eternity past:

**Eph. 1:4-5**: In love God predestined us for adoption to himself as sons, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace.

Why did God chose you for salvation? Because he loved you. His predestining work is actually an expression of his love. What does he get in return? Praise! We praise God for his glorious, amazing, loving grace because we didn't deserve it.

**John 3:16**: For God so what? Loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever should believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

The Father sending his Son into the world to save us was an act of love.

And really, the chief thing we should understand about God is his love. Don't get me wrong, God wants us to know the truth. We're big on truth. He wants us to be holy, living righteous lives. He wants us to be discerning, knowing good from evil.

That's great, but love is the foremost thing people should see in us. The apostle John gets to this truth in two ways:

**1 John 4:8:** Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love.

**1 John 4:16:** God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

Bottom line: if you don't love, don't pretend like you know God because you don't. How do we know we know God? Because we love each other.

Which begs the question, of course, what is love? How do we define it?

Well since God is love, it's his definition of love that we look to, not the culture and not our own fleshly desires of what we say we love.

Love is not what we feel, love is lived out in our God honoring actions. Will we have feelings attached to love? Sure. But not always good ones.

And just to be really honest with you, the way love is expressed is usually very difficult. In fact, I think it's safe to say that the more difficult it is for someone to express these things, the more they're digging deep to love.

Now, remember our context here. We've been talking about spiritual gifts in the church. Why pause in the middle of all this and talk about love? Because someone can be exceedingly gifted by the Spirit to serve the church but if they don't have love they're worse than useless in God's church.

So that's the big takeaway this morning: If you don't know what your spiritual gifts are or how to serve in the body of Christ, just love people and you will be just fine.

You want to serve the body of Christ? You want to be great in the Kingdom of God? Just love the people next to you. There's no way you can make a wrong turn by just loving people.

So let's look at the lead in to all of this and then we'll start looking at these various elements of love. We'll take 2 weeks on love here.

### 1) The Church Without Love. **Read 1-3**

So the gist here is that you can have the most amazing gifts ever, but if you don't have love you are worthless in God's church.

And you say "Wow, Jason, that's pretty harsh. I'd be worthless?" Well, Paul says it's actually worse than that.

Paul uses hyperbole here to describe how God views very gifted, but very loveless people. First, he says they're like slamming cymbals. I don't know about you, but I don't really enjoy just being around someone who's crashing cymbals together wildly. Or pounding on a huge gong over and over.

The effect of those 2 instruments is that they are irritating and disruptive. No one wants to be around them because they serve no purpose other than to irritate. That's what the most gifted person in the world is without love. You could have the spiritual gift of tongues so great that you could speak to every language on the planet. You could have long conversations with angels all day long, but if you're not loving you're an absolute bother.

Most of you probably know about the trucker protests going on in Canada. And as much as stopping traffic is causing all kinds of difficulty for the city - and cities all over Canada - what's really causing havoc is the nonstop honking. An Ottawa judge actually made it illegal to honk for the next 10 days because people are so exhausted with the honking. Well, good luck enforcing that.

Why are they honking? Because it's irritating. Paul says a lack of love is an absolute irritant in the church. I mean, can you imagine some guy all morning long just yelling "honk, honk, honk" in our service. Not stopping, not quieting down, not caring what others think. That's the person in the church without love.

These are all hyperbole examples by the way. Exaggeration for effect. And he goes on with hyperbole. **Read 2**

So he's kind of going through all the gifts here. Prophecy, words of knowledge and wisdom, and faith. If he had those to the greatest degree, but no love. What would he be?

Nothing. Worthless.

See, people often get into the trap thinking that their contribution to the body of Christ is mostly about their spiritual gifts. What they can do and how well they can do it. Well, spiritual gifts are good, of course, because they are given by the Spirit. But if there's no love, whatever gain we might think we have is actually loss. It's nothing.

The last statement is a little ironic. **Read 3**

So maybe you've got the gift of generosity. Or you're willing to be burned alive for the gospel. Man, what a super star in the church!

I mean, in the Christian life we know that we give now in order to get a reward. We give up earthly possessions in order to get heavenly ones.

**2 Cor. 9:6:** whoever sows sparingly, will reap sparingly. Whoever sows bountifully will reap bountifully.

If you give generously to the cause of Christ in this life, you'll be rewarded in the next.

Jesus says the same thing: Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourself treasures in heaven where where neither moth nor rust destroy and where thieves cannot break in and steal. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also.

**Matt 6:1**

So what if someone gives up everything - even his own life - for the gospel. But he doesn't have love? What does he gain?

Nothing. All gain is forfeited.

Listen, if we're not willing to love people in the church, don't give or sacrifice yourself for the gospel because God is not going to reward you for that. You might as well just hang on to that now and enjoy it now because you won't get anything in the future.

Spiritual gifts and love are like a multiplication problem. What do you get if you multiply anything by zero? Zero. No matter how big the first number is.

You could have a spiritual gift level of 2,000,000 but if you multiply that by 0 love what do you get? Zero.

That's what Paul is saying. This is how critical love is in the Christian life.

So what is love? Paul gives us a list not only of what love, but equally important, what love *is not*.

We have 6 things love is and 8 things love is not. Both are equally important as we seek to live out love like our Heavenly Father who loves us.

**1) Love is Patient - Read 4**

Are we patient with people? Are we growing in patience toward other people? Are you more patient with your husband today than a year ago? Are you more patient with your kids today than a year ago? With the person sitting next to you? Or the people you work with?

As much as we've been talking about the **gifts** of the Spirit, patience is a **fruit** of the Spirit in **Galatians 5**. Fruit is what naturally grows on a tree. Apple trees bear apples, orange trees bear oranges. And the older the tree the more the fruit.

In the same way, Christians produce patience. And the longer we're in the faith, the more patience we produce.

I actually like the NKJV translation of this term because it really gets at the heart of what this word is: It says "love suffers long" or is long-suffering. That's what we're talking about here. One dictionary says to bear up under provocation without complaint.

That's what we're called to do as followers of Jesus: endure suffering without complaint. How do we do that?

Well, think about God. God, by his nature is patient, long suffering. Think about all the nonsense and sin God puts up with. I mean, he put up with the planet for almost a millennium before drowning the whole earth in a flood. After that, had humanity fundamentally changed? No. Every thought of our hearts is still evil continually, yet God puts up with us.

It really is amazing that God doesn't just obliterate the entire planet. He'd be completely right to do so. And not just for those people "out there." Think about your life - how God has been patient to you.

If we're all just honest, the fact that God hasn't already wiped us off the planet long ago is a testimony to his patience toward us. And if an infinitely holy and righteous God can put up with **us**, we can suffer long with each other.

And look at Jesus: Who, though he was reviled he did not revile in return; when he suffered he didn't threaten, but he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. (**1 Pet. 2:23-24**)

Jesus didn't lash out. Jesus didn't threaten. He was patient even in the most adverse situation imaginable, and he calls us to the same.

## **2) Love is Kind.**

I don't know what comes to mind when you hear kind. But I usually think someone who is polite. Like a grandpa who never gets mad at anyone and is just pleasant to be around. That's not precisely what Paul is getting at, but I don't think that's far off either either.

**Titus 3:2** says we are to show perfect courtesy toward all people. Just being nice is a Christian virtue.

Or put it another way: being a troll is not a Christian virtue.

Being grumpy all the time is not a Christian virtue.

Being impolite is not a Christian virtue.

"But I'm speaking the truth!" But not in what? Love.

Think of Jesus: there's a reason little children were drawn to him. Kids are usually scared of strangers anyway, but especially those who are stern or rough around the edges, kids will hide from.

But children flocked to Jesus; everyone flocked to Jesus. Prostitutes and tax collectors - the outcasts of society - flocked to Jesus I think because of his general kind demeanor toward them.

And it's Jesus's demeanor because it's God's demeanor.

**Rom. 2:4:** It is God's patience and God's kindness that leads people to repentance.

Why are you in the faith? Because God was nice to you. He was patient and kind to you. It's his kindness toward us that leads us to saving repentance. And we see that kindness most fully in the death of Jesus. **Turn to Eph. 4:31-32**

There's a lot of words we'd probably use about the death of Jesus: sacrificial, atoning, merciful.

But one word we probably don't use because it seems a little out of place is kind. It was kind of Jesus to forgive us through his death. But that's the word Paul uses here in **Ephesians 4. Read 31-32**

So put away all this nonsense and be kind to each other. And he uses the word tender hearted or some of you have compassionate. It's a heartfelt gentle love we are to have for each other. Why? Because that's what Jesus had for us. That tender heartedness is wrapped up in forgiveness.

Do you have a hard time being kind to certain people in the church? Do some people irritate you? How do you overcome that?

Remember that Jesus was tender toward you and forgave you.

**Side:** You ever read John's Gospel and at the last Supper John's leaning back against Jesus? Leaning into Jesus's chest. Can I just tell you something: that seems weird. Jesus is 33, John is probably a young teenager and they're cuddling. But here's the deal, there's no sexual stuff there at all. There's a tenderness that's there. A true love that usually we only see between a parent and young child.

Here's the thing: I think we're to read that passage and realize that Jesus is so tender hearted that if we were there, we'd want to cuddle with Jesus too. Not in a weird way, but because Jesus just loves us and is tender toward us.

And that's how we should be toward each other. If Jesus - God the Son - forgave you and forgave me and forgave that person in your life that's really, really irritating and is tender to them, Then we can do it too. If Jesus can be tender toward us, surely we can be tender toward each other.

### **3) Love Does Not envy.**

**Back in 1 Cor. 13** we have the first of 8 descriptions about what love is **not**. Love does not envy.

Envy is really the sin of jealousy. It's a violation of the 10th commandment: you shall not covet your neighbor's house or wife or male servant or female servant or ox or donkey or cell phone or 401K or car.

You shall not covet their clothes or job or situation in life.

It's not wrong to desire things. That's human. It's okay to desire a husband. It's okay to desire a car. The problem with envy is that it takes that desire too far. It says "if no one was looking and there were no consequences, and God didn't care, I'd take it from you."

It's theft in the heart. It's also usually accompanied by self-righteousness because usually we're thinking "They don't deserve that, I should have it." I'm better than they are so I should have what they have.

When you have that attitude toward your neighbor or your sibling or your friend it's not loving. You can't love a person **and** want to steal all their stuff in your heart. You can't love a person and view yourself as more righteous than they are.

How do we kill envy in our hearts? We look to Jesus. Jesus was the exact opposite of envy. Jesus didn't ever want to take what wasn't his. He did just the opposite. He gave up absolutely everything he had for us!

**Phil 2:5ff:** Have the same mindset as Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, didn't count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but took on the form of a servant and humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The second person of the Trinity - the holy God of the universe - gave up everything for us. That's exact opposite of envy. And we're called to that same thing. And just as Jesus was honored for his sacrifice, so we too will be honored for ours.

The other antidote to envy is to realize that our good God has given us everything we need. Not a penny more, not a penny less. All that we have is precisely from his gracious hand and we should be thankful for it.

#### **4) Does not boast**

This is sort of the opposite of envy. Envy is being jealous for other people's things. Boasting is pride in what we already have. Or who we are.

It's bragging about our accomplishments. It's name dropping. It's always giving people our resume. It's listing our assets to anyone who will put up with us.

You ever been around people who all they do is talk about themselves? What they did? Or how good they are? How much they deserve. It's like they're Muhammad Ali walking around talking about how they're the greatest. They're the greatest.

My kids are the best, my job is the best, my system is the best, my cleverness is the best. I'm the strongest, prettiest, wisest. Me, me, me. And sometimes it sounds really humble or really wise.

So I started thinking: what do I boast in? How do I fail here? See, the problem is that when we boast we don't consciously realize we're boasting. It's so natural and sly that we just do and it's part of us and we think we're fine.

And so I'm sitting there in the coffee shop thinking about boasting and there's this lady behind me telling all her friends about this amazing deal she got on a computer she bought. On and on for like 10 minutes. And you know what hit me? I do the same exact thing. I'll be honest, I felt conviction that I boast about getting good deals on things. Because I realized what I'm doing is boasting about my cleverness or shrewdness. It's usually not thanking God for his merciful provision. It's "look at me" for my provision.

Is there a time to talk about the good things going on in life? Sure. **Look at 1 Cor. 15:7-11**

This is Paul talking about the gospel and how Jesus appeared to him and made him an apostle. Notice the balance here. **Read**

Did Paul work hard as an apostle? Sure. But even that statement completely surrounded by acknowledging that everything he has is by the grace of God.

**Vs. 10** is the antidote to boasting: But by the grace of God I am what I am.

Are you really smart? It's because God made your brain. He could have made you a worm. But in grace he made you with a brain to be used for his glory.

Are you really shrewd? It's because God has given you an ability to create and preserve and conserve wealth. Use that for God's glory.

Are you strong? Use the strength God has given you for his glory not for your own. One day you will be very weak.

Are you successful at things? It's because God has given you favor in the matter.

The antidote to boasting is the realization that without our good God sovereignly orchestrating our lives we would have nothing and we deserve nothing.

**He** blessed us in spite of ourselves to bring him glory.

Back in **1 Cor. 13** Paul addresses the next issue, which is similar.

### **5) Love is not arrogant.**

This is very similar to boasting. Usually those who are proud and arrogant boast out loud about themselves. They talk about themselves. Or they deride other people for their failings.

So what is the difference? It seems to be that boasting is something we do with our mouth. Arrogance is just the general demeanor we have from our heart.

Literally, Paul says that love is not puffed up. Love doesn't have a big head. This is a heart thing. We know that whether or not we say things, what really matters is the heart. And this gets to the heart.

We've all had times where we bite our tongue to keep from saying something profoundly dumb. But we're thinking it the whole time.

The gospel tells us that even at our very best, we are unworthy sinners who owe all we have to Jesus. Who loved us, and calls us to love one another in the same way.

**Pray**