

The Cross and Christian Community

The Cross and Christian Love

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THE CROSS AND CHRISTIAN LOVE 1 Corinthians 13

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 13. I have been looking forward to preaching this chapter ever since we began this series, and my study in it over the last couple of weeks has been nothing short of exhilarating and convicting and comforting and inspiring all wrapped up in one. First Corinthians 13 is one of the most famous chapters in all of the Bible—the love chapter—a passage that is often read at weddings as well as funerals. It's a chapter that I quoted the night I asked Heather to marry me. But I don't think I realized—and I would even say I don't think most people realize—the potency of this passage, because it is so often read out of the context in which it is written.

Sandwiched in between Paul's explanation of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and his exhortations about gifts of prophecy and tongues in 1 Corinthians 14, this chapter has huge ramifications for understanding what it means to love the body of Christ called the church, and specifically the local church. I have found myself studying this passage and praying for The Church at Brook Hills—that you and I and we together would be marked by love like this. One writer said,

It is clear that [1 Corinthians] 13 must be studied in the context of the rest of Paul's letter to the church of Corinth. Otherwise it remains mere words—noble, even ennobling, but only words. [But] when applied to a local church, [this chapter] becomes dynamite, [for] it uncovers all the weaknesses, gaps, failures and sins in any Christian community.

Another writer said, "The full impact and depth of [the] truths [here] cannot be discovered in isolation. Much of the power, and even much of the purpose and beauty, is missed when the passage is studied and applied out of context, [which is the local church]."

What I want us to do is something a bit unique this morning. The last thing I want us to do as a local church is just to read and study and have a good lesson on love today. I really want us to internalize this text, to reflect on it, to evaluate our lives individually and our life together in it, and to pray together that God would make love the mark of The Church at Brook Hills. In order to encourage and challenge each other in this way, I want us to actually try to memorize part of this text together this morning. I know of no better way to internalize and reflect and meditate on a passage of Scripture than to memorize it, to let its words literally fill your mind and your heart, so that's what I want to do today. We're going to read the whole text, consider the context together, and then we're going to camp out in verses 4-7, where I want to lead us to memorize those verses together. My hope is that we'll walk away from this time together as a faith family with these words about love deeply impressed upon our hearts.

This is going to involve some work—memorizing four verses together this morning—so get ready. Let's read the whole chapter first. First Corinthians 13,

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)

A Perspective on Love from Corinth...

Again, we must understand this text within its context, so consider these words from the perspective of the church at Corinth. Here was a people who, based on what we read in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, were gifted spiritually, and they saw those gifts as a sign of their spirituality. Amidst all their focus on spiritual gifts—particularly the more sensational gifts like prophecy and tongues (which Paul will address specifically in the next chapter)—they were losing sight of what was clearly most important.

If you look at how love is described in verses 4-7 and think about all we've read in 1 Corinthians 13, you realize this is not just a random list of characteristics of love. Instead, this is a direct rebuke of a lack of love in specific ways at Corinth. The Christians at Corinth were impatient and unkind toward each other. They were filled with jealousy for one other, puffed up and proud. Boasting in men (1 Corinthians 1-3), rejoicing in evil (1 Corinthians 5), taking each other to court (1 Corinthians 6), insisting on their own way, even if it caused others to stumble (1 Corinthians 8), acting and even dressing and praying in ways that were rude and shameful (1 Corinthians 11:2-16), taking the Lord's Supper in selfishness (1 Corinthians 11:17-34), and competing over who was most spiritually gifted (1 Corinthians 12).

Spiritual gifts are significant, but love is supreme.

Paul pauses at this point when he's talking about spiritual gifts, and he sums up the whole letter by saying, "You guys are missing the point, specifically when it comes to spiritual gifts." First Corinthians 13 was written down at this point in history and at this point in this letter to show that spiritual gifts are significant, but love is supreme.

He immediately starts by addressing the gifts that they were prone to boast in—speaking in tongues, which they thought virtually equated them with angels speaking the words of heaven; prophetic powers; gifts of knowledge and faith that moves mountains; even great sacrifices in their lives and with their possessions. Paul says, “None of that matters apart from love.” None of it.

Follow this. This is huge! Love is the necessity apart from which nothing in the Christian life matters. Nothing. If I speak in the tongues of angels, but have not love, I’m just an annoying noise. If I know and speak the mysteries of heaven, if I have faith that can move mountains, but don’t have love...listen to the end of verse 2. It’s not just, “these gifts are nothing.” Paul says, “I am nothing.” The Bible is not just saying here that, apart from love, spiritual gifts are worthless. The Bible is saying that apart from love, I am worthless. I am nothing apart from love.

Nothing I do matters. Verse 3, “I gain nothing” even if I give away everything I have to the poor. Follow this. Even if I sacrifice my life, if I do this without love, it’s worth nothing. Martyrdom itself, the Bible says, is meaningless without love.

Take this text and apply it to the things we value even in our faith family, and realize the implications. For me, if I preach God’s Word with power and zeal and passion but have not love, it’s worth nothing. I’m just making noise. If we have Bible knowledge and theological training but have not love, it’s worth nothing. If we do small groups and we gather together to pray and worship but have not love, none of it means anything. If we are radical in our giving and our going, if we do foster care and adoption, if we are involved in ministry across this city, if we go on mission trips around the world, but we have not love, we miss the entire point.

Love is the necessity apart from which nothing and no one matters at all. Do you see what the Bible is saying here? This is a shattering conclusion: “We are, I am nothing without love, no matter how much we know and say and do.” This doesn’t mean that all of these things aren’t good, that preaching and learning and gathering and giving and going are not good things. They are good things, significant things when they are done in the context of love. Spiritual gifts are great when they are used as an expression of love in the church.

Keep going there in your notes. See that, yes, love is the necessity apart from which nothing in the Christian life matters, but at the same time, love is the field in which everything in the Christian life flourishes. When these gifts are exercised, when these things are done in love, there is power and potency in the church. This is not Paul saying, “Don’t worry about gifts, don’t worry about giving, don’t worry about faith.” No, this is Paul saying, “Use your gifts, and give sacrificially of your possessions and your very lives, and do it all in the context of love.”

You’ll notice right after this chapter, at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 14, when he starts to talk again more specifically about tongues and prophecy, he says, “Pursue love, pursue love, and in that context earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.” It’s also why he says at the end of 1 Corinthians 12, at the end of that chapter about spiritual gifts, “Now I will show you a still more excellent way.” Translation: “I want to pause and remind you of something that’s not just a specific gift for a few, but something that’s an overall way of life for us all: Love. Love is literally the way of life in the church.” They were missing it, thinking that using certain gifts was the sign of spirituality. Paul says in the first part of this chapter, “No, those gifts are significant, but love is supreme.”

Spiritual gifts are temporal, but love is eternal.

Then, he goes on in the last part of this chapter to say that spiritual gifts are temporal, but love is eternal. That's what verses 8-13 are all about. For a people who thought they had spiritually arrived because they spoke in the tongues of angels, the very language of heaven (so they thought), Paul says, "I've got news for you. We're not going to be speaking in tongues in heaven. Or prophesying. Or filling each other in on new revelation." No, these spiritual gifts are given to the church for a specific period of time, but when we are with God in a new heaven and a new earth, we won't need these gifts anymore. When the perfect comes, Paul says, the partial will pass away.

He uses two illustrations—one of a child growing into adulthood and one of looking in a mirror instead of seeing face-to-face. The purpose of both illustrations is to show that spiritual gifts are temporary. It's not that they're childish in the sense that spiritual gifts of tongues or prophecy are immature or inappropriate; they're very appropriate for a time. My youngest son has just started crawling, and it's the cutest thing in the world to see him smiling as he scoots around the floor. That is totally appropriate for a 9-month-old, but if he's doing the same thing when he's 29-years-old, that's not going to be good. There are a whole host of other things that he's doing at 9 months that aren't going to be appropriate at 29 years. Paul says to the church at Corinth, "You think you're fully mature now that you're crawling." He says, "No, this is just temporary. You've not reached adulthood because you're a crawler!"

These gifts and their use in the church are going to fade away. Why? The second illustration: Now we see and know and learn and speak about God indirectly. It's not that what we prophesy or pray or speak is untrue in any way; it's just incomplete. We're looking forward to the day when we will see Christ face-to-face, and we will know truly, without any sin or error at all in us. These gifts in these ways will no longer be necessary. In this way, prophecies will pass away, tongues will cease, but what will remain? Love. It never ends. Spiritual gifts are temporal, but love is eternal. Spiritual gifts are significant, but love is supreme.

The Nature of Love in the Church...

What is the nature of love in the church? What Paul does in the middle is he gives us not so much a definition of love as much as it is a description of the way love looks in the church. I want to give you just a couple of truths that characterize love in general, and then I want us to reflect on love in specific ways. One writer said, "Studying [1 Corinthians 13] is like taking apart a flower; part of the beauty is lost when the components are separated." Before we carefully dissect this flower, I want to see it as a whole. When you step back and look at verses 4-7, I think you see two primary characteristics of love.

Love is essentially selfless.

One, love is essentially selfless. All the lovelessness at Corinth could be traced back to selfishness. As you read through verses 4-7, you begin to realize that, according to this chapter, the opposite of love is not hate; instead, the opposite of love is pride. It is arrogance, boasting, seeking your own way. To love like this, you have to die to yourself.

We have to realize that within ourselves, we all have a sinful nature that prioritizes self. We don't like it when things don't go our way. We don't like it when people hurt us. We don't

like it when people irritate us. We do like it when people think and speak well of us. We like it when others bring pleasure to us.

In fact, that's oftentimes what motivates our love for them. Isn't that how we view love in the world? In terms of warm feelings, desire, even romance. Many times when we say, "I love you," what we really mean is, "I love me and I want you," and our love for others is actually selfish in nature.

The kind of love that is described here is essentially selfless, meaning in its essence it is selfless. It is patient when patience is not deserved. It is kind when kindness is difficult. It doesn't envy or boast because it's not focused on what I have and who I am, but on what you have and who you are. It insists on others' way, not our own way.

Now this doesn't mean that love doesn't want to be happy. No, the difference is that love seeks its happiness in the good of others. It's there in your notes, and it sums up the selfless nature of love. It seeks its joy in the good of others to the glory of God. Love does not say, "The secret to happiness is finding myself." Love says, "The secret to happiness, to joy, is dying to myself, laying down my life, for the good of others to the glory of God."

Love is inevitably active.

Love is essentially selfless, and love is inevitably active. The Bible here doesn't use adjectives to describe love, but verbs, descriptions of action—15 of them to be exact. The picture here not is words and ideas, but deeds and actions. Love does this, love does that, love doesn't do this, love doesn't do that. The overall picture is clear: It is not conveyed by words as much as it is shown by behavior. Paul has not set out to define love here; he has set out to apply love in present continuous tense verbs, showing the ongoing behavioral habits of people who love.

The Marks of Love in the Christian...

Love is inevitably active in certain ways, so we come to the marks of love in the Christian. I phrase that this way because this is, after all, what Jesus said should mark us, right? John 13:35, *"By this will people know that you're my disciples: if you love one another"* (John 13:35). What a statement! Jesus says, "Selfless, active love will be the mark of discipleship to me in the world. It will be the fruit of your life in me, the mark (far more than spiritual gifts) of the Spirit's work in you."

We need to evaluate our lives and our relationships with one another according to these characteristics of love. We need to ask, "Are these characteristics evident in our relationships in this church, with one another, with small group members, with the people sitting around us?" And then we need to ask, "Are these characteristics evident in my love for my spouse and my children and my friends and my co-workers and my neighbors?"

This is where we're going to start memorizing, not just for the sake of memorization, but for the sake of internalization, reflection, meditation, in a sense. Let's just simply walk together through verses 4-7, impress these words upon our minds, and humbly consider them in our hearts and lives.

Let's start with the first three words. I'll say them, and then you repeat after me. You can't look down. No cheating, all right? That would not be loving. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing!

Are you patient with others?

"*Love is patient...*" Say that with me, "Love is patient." Say it again, "Love is patient." As you say that, I ask you: Are you patient with others? With people in the church? With people in your home? With people at your work? The word means not to just wait for others, but even to endure injury from others without seeking retaliation toward them. Are you willing to be inconvenienced, annoyed, even hurt by others over and over again without growing upset or angry?

I think of so many people in my life who are patient with me—from Heather to my kids to the people I work most closely with to this church. You have been patient with me over these last seven years. What were you thinking calling me as a 27-year-old to pastor this church? You have been patient with me. Are you and I patient with others?

Are you kind to others?

"*Love is patient and kind.*" Say that with me, "Love is patient and kind." One more time, "Love is patient and kind."

So, are you kind to others? This is not just passive endurance of others, but active goodness toward others. Do you actively work for the welfare of others in this church? In your home, with your wife, with your husband, with your children, with your parents? At your work, where you live, are you seeking out the good of others? Is this how you've approached this gathering today? Is this how you approach your gathering with your small group—not in terms of what you might get, but what you might give? When you look at the people around you, are you pro-actively working to show kindness to them? Love is patient and kind.

Are you envious of what others have?

"*Love does not envy or boast.*" Say that with me, "Love does not envy or boast." Another time, "Love does not envy or boast." Now put it all together. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast." One more time, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast."

Envy. Are you envious of what others have? Are you prone to compare yourself with others, always thinking, "This person or that person has it all figured out"? I wish I had what they have. Or even, I wish they didn't have what they have.

Envy or jealousy is no minor offense. Remember it was Eve's envy of God, wanting what He has, to know what He knows that brought about sin in the world. Immediately on the heels of this, it was Cain's envy that led to murder. Not long after that, it was envy in Joseph's brothers that led them to sell Joseph into slavery. Talking about jealousy, Proverbs 27:4 says, "*Wrath is fierce and anger is a flood, but who can stand before jealousy?*" Likewise, James 3:14-16, "*If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, this is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.*"

Without question, envy can be one of the hardest battles that we fight in the Christian life, in Christian community, because there's always someone who has something we don't, who is better at this or that than we are. Consider ways you envy what others around you have.

Do you boast about what you have?

"Love does not envy or boast." Do you boast about what you have? This is the opposite of jealousy, for this is in essence wanting to make others jealous of what we have.

Are you arrogant before others?

It leads right into the next description of love. "*It is not arrogant or rude.*" Say that after me, "It is not arrogant or rude." One more time, "It is not arrogant or rude." Let's try to put it all together. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude." Hang with me! Let's say it one more time. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude."

Are you arrogant before others? The word for "boasting" literally means to be a braggart or a windbag, and the word for "arrogant" here is to be puffed up by ourselves. Sometimes it's that overt in our lives or others' lives, but oftentimes, it's more subtle, isn't it?

We all like to be made much of, to be admired. We like when people notice our successes, and we like when people miss our failures. So we minimize our failures, and we maximize our successes in others' eyes in subtle ways. We turn conversations in ways that make us look better, in ways that draw attention to good things about us and cover over bad things about us. In our core, we have a deep level of concern for ourselves before others. Are you arrogant, even in subtle ways, before others?

Are you rude to others?

Are you rude to others? Saying shameful things or acting in improper ways, particularly when offended by others? Or, to the point here at Corinth, simply because you have the right to do something, you do it, regardless of how that may affect the people around you? "I have the right to eat these foods," the church members in 1 Corinthians 8 said. "I have the right to not wear a head covering," the women in 1 Corinthians 11 said.

Just because somebody else doesn't like it doesn't mean I shouldn't do it. To be rude is to disregard others when considering something we say or do. It's the very opposite of kindness, which continually regards others with what we say or do, always considering how this or that action may affect someone else for their good. Love is not offensive. Love is not rude.

Do you want things your own way? Are you irritable when things don't go your way?

Let's review. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude." One more time, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude."

Now, the next part, "*It does not insist on its own way.*" Say that with me, "It does not insist on its own way." One more time, "It does not insist on its own way." Then go ahead and see what Paul says next. "*It is not irritable or resentful.*" Let's say that, "It is not irritable or resentful." One more time, "It is not irritable or resentful."

Now just this part together, starting with "insisting on our own way." "It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful." One more time, "It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful."

Do you want things your own way? And are you irritable when things don't go your way? This was the climax of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 8-10. When he came to the end of 1

Corinthians 10, he said, "I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of man, that they may be saved." This is love—not seeking my own way, and not being irritated when things don't go my way. This is so hard, isn't it? This is not natural. One preacher said,

By nature none of us likes to be interrupted when things are going well. We do not like delays in our plans. We all have a strong craving for a trouble-free life and we tend to get irritated when our best-laid plans go awry. We don't like traffic tie-ups on the freeway when we have an appointment. We don't like overheated cars on vacation. We don't like for babies to cry through the night. We don't like checks to get lost in the mail. We like it when life flows according to plan and pleasure. And when it doesn't, our nature is provoked to complain and grumble and murmur...[to] be angry and critical.

Don't miss this. Any sign of a temper is a signal of a lack of love. Any fits of anger are uncovering roots of pride. Now the Bible is not talking here about a righteous anger that hates sin in the way that God hates sin and is set against sin. No, the Bible is talking here about our reaction when our plans are interrupted or our feelings are offended, and we react in irritation and frustration that shows the priority we've placed on ourselves and betrays the patience God has called us to have with others.

Are you irritable? Is there evidence of anger toward others or a temper with others? Another preacher said, "You may say it's no big deal when you lose your temper because it's all over in a few minutes," but the preacher went on to point out, "So is a nuclear bomb." If we're not careful, this irritability easily leads to resentment. "It is not irritable or resentful."

Do you keep any record of others' wrongs?

Do you keep any record of others' wrongs? The wording is literally to keep a book of evil, of tabs on those who have wronged you. The Bible says love does not keep an account of offenses, always ready to bring them up to build a case against someone. This resentment breeds unforgiveness and builds bitterness in our hearts that, not only is hurtful toward others, but is harmful for ourselves. It's been said that harboring bitterness in your heart is like drinking poison and waiting for someone else to die. It kills you. Love is not resentful.

Do you find any pleasure when others do wrong?

We're halfway through these verses. Do you have them? Let's try from the start. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful."

Now verse 6, "*It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.*" Say that with me, "It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth." One more time, "It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth."

Do you find any pleasure when others do wrong? Do you rejoice in any way over wrongdoing? Now, I'm sure that if we were to answer that question without really thinking about it, we'd almost immediately say, "Of course I don't rejoice over wrongdoing." But I want you to think about someone you don't really like. Maybe it's someone you know really well or someone you only know from a distance. This could be your co-worker down the hall that drives you nuts, or it could be the President of the United States or anywhere in between. Are you prone to experience any kind of pleasure when that person fails? When

that person fails, are you prone to think, "I knew it. It serves them right"? And we rejoice in their wrongdoing.

Or consider someone who has deeply offended you. Are you prone to wish evil upon them and to be glad in any way when evil befalls them? Or are you prone to eagerly pass on news of evil in others? This is the essence of gossip, isn't it? The sick tendency to share unfavorable facts or falsehoods about other people, literally gloating over their sins and shortcomings, all the while disguising it as self-righteous concern.

Do you experience only delight when others do right?

"Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth!" Do you experience only delight when others do right? You see how all of these are tied together, don't you? When you envy someone, you rejoice when they lose something or something goes wrong. It makes you feel better. Yet if something goes right, and maybe that which they have that you want they get more of, you are all the more frustrated. Instead of rejoicing with them, you are all the more envious toward them. See the web here.

Patience with others and kindness toward others both lead to rejoicing in righteousness and truth in others. Do you experience only delight (not envy, not resentment) when others do right?

Let's say it all together. We're almost to the end. "Love is patient and kind; it does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth." The four final phrases. Repeat them after me. *"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."* Now put them together. let's stay this last sentence together. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Do you tire of support for others?

Do you tire of support for others? This goes back to the patience that this passage started with. Love bears all things. Love bears with others, protecting them, providing for them, caring for them, feeling their pain, and persevering with them in patience. Love bears all things. It never tires of support for others.

Do you hold onto faith for others?

Do you hold onto faith for others? There are days for all of us when faith is hard to come by, and we need people to have faith for us. We need people who love us enough to stand in the gap, believing and trusting in God's grace in us, holding onto faith for us. Love believes all things. It holds onto faith for others.

Do you lose hope for others?

Do you lose hope for others? You hear these phrases, and you can't help but to think back to 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul commands the church to excommunicate a member, to actually remove a member from the church because of unrepentant sin. You might hear that and be tempted to think, "Well, what's loving about that? Isn't that giving up on someone?" Then you remember the motivation for church discipline. Why do we do this?

Paul says in verse 5 of that chapter, *"Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord"* (1 Corinthians 5:5). In other words, "Do this, do church discipline, even this step of removing a member from the church in hope that this man will be saved, that he will see the end of his sin and himself, and he will turn back to Christ." This is why we do the tough work of gently confronting one another

in sin. We do it out of hope for others. Even as we sometimes have to remove a member from the church for unrepentant sin, we don't do that in any sense of giving up on that person, but of saying, "We love you, and we're doing this in hope that you will eventually repent, and we are waiting - patiently, lovingly - waiting for you whenever that occurs." Love hopes all things. Love hopes all things. It never loses hope for others.

Do you endure trials with others?

Love endures all things. Do you endure trials with others? This really just sums up the whole passage, starting with patience and ending with this succession of phrases—love bearing, believing, and hoping, and in the middle of it all, enduring—because, as verse 8 says right after this, "*Love never ends.*" What a beautiful description of love.

Do you think you have it? Let's try it, two times. Are you ready? "*Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*"

One more time, "*Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*"

This is a penetrating passage, isn't it? It's been suggested as a helpful exercise to try to replace the word "love" with your name in this passage, and see how true it is. For example, "David is patient and kind; David not does envy or boast; he is not arrogant or rude..., " and so on. You might try it. I have, and I told my small group that exercise was extremely convicting and humbling because there are so many ways in which I am not loving.

I want this kind of love to mark my life, and I want this kind of love to mark this church. It's not easy. Think about it. So many of these descriptions of love imply that it's not easy. The implications of 1 Corinthians 13 are clear. People can be irritating, and people will do wrong to you and to others. People will offend you. People will have things that you want, and you'll have things that they want.

The Power to Love in Christ...

How do we love one another, then? You look back at this passage, and there is only one name you can insert for "love," and this passage be completely true. That name is Jesus Christ. This is where we realize that what's being described here is a distinctly Christian love, a love that is personified in Christ alone, and a love that is possible in us only through Christ alone. I've mentioned already that 1 Corinthians 13 is less a definition of love than it is a description of love.

So what is the definition of Christian love?

As we close out, based on 1 Corinthians 13, I want to give you a definition of love—Christ-driven, Christ-exalting, Christ-enabling love. What is the definition of Christian love? Simply summarized, to love is to be toward others the way God in Christ is toward us. The reason love is supreme over spiritual gifts, and the reason love is greater even than faith and hope,

and the reason love never ends is because love characterizes the nature of God Himself. First John 4:16, "*God is love.*"

So how do we show love like this? Well, first and foremost, before anything else, we receive love like this. We receive His love. You look back at this passage, and you realize this is how God in Christ is toward us. Even those first two characteristics, right? "*Love is patient and kind.*"

Those two descriptions, in five simple words, summarizes God's approach toward men. He is patient with us. God is patient with us, and He is kind toward us. Though we have sinned, He is patient. He has shown kindness to us in the cross. Talk about bearing all things. He bore our sins, carried our sorrows and was struck for our iniquities. He keeps no record of wrongs. I urge you to receive His love.

And as we receive His love, we reflect His love. See it! The love of God is the fountain from which love for others flows. If God is patient with us, rebellious sinners that we are, how much more should we be patient with others? If Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, how can we boast in anything? See it. Our selfless love for others is simply a reflection of God's sacrificial love for us.

And what is distinct about Christian love?

Which leads to the next question: What is distinct about Christian love? Many times this passage is read almost as a hymn, or ode, to love in general, but there is nothing general about this love. This love, the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13, is distinct from any and every other definition of love that this world might offer. This is truly, distinctly Christian love.

What makes it distinct? Well one, Christian love is exemplified in the cross of Christ. First John 3, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and we also ought to lay down our lives for each other." The epitome of love is the cross of Christ where the patience and kindness of God came to full expression in the sacrifice of His Son—not for His friends, but for His enemies. Romans 5 makes it clear. "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die, but God demonstrates His love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

See the distinction of Christian love here that sets it apart from every form of worldly love, even the most passionate worldly love. Take, for example, a young man who looks at his wife and says, "I love you!" At least in part, he is reflecting the reality that he finds his wife lovely. There is something about her, in her that compels love from him. But Christian love is totally different because it is not based at all on the loveliness of another.

When the Bible says in John 3:16 that "*God so loved the world,*" it is not because the world is so lovely that God can't help but to love it. On the contrary, God loves a world that is unlovely, a world that has turned away from Him, against Him. God so loved an unlovely world that He gave His One and Only Son to die for the sins of unlovely, undeserving men and women.

See this distinction of Christian love. It is based on mercy in the lover, not merit in the beloved. This is what is to mark our community with one another in the church. Not who deserves to be loved, not those who are most lovely, but those who are hardest to love, those who are least lovely. This is where the distinct love of Christ is most clear in the

church. Christian love is exemplified in the cross of Christ. It is based on mercy in the lover, not merit in the beloved.

The second distinction is Christian love is empowered by the Spirit of Christ. Love like this, love like Christ is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in the Christian. We don't have to look long at this description of love to realize that these things are not fundamentally in our nature. Our nature is prone to be impatient and unkind. We are easily irritated, prone to consider ourselves over and above others.

This is where we realize that Christian love is not natural, but supernatural. This passage drives us not to ourselves, to muster up this kind of love for others, for we cannot do it. You think about your enemies or the people who have hurt you the most in this life, the people who have offended or abused, harmed or betrayed you, and you think, "How can I love them? I have nothing in me that wants to love them." This is where you realize that the source of your love for others cannot be found in yourself; it can only be found in Christ, in the Spirit of the One who gave His life for those who sinned against Him. This is the only source of selfless love for sinful people around you.

Christian love is empowered by the Spirit of Christ, and finally, Christian love is enamored with the return of Christ. The vision the Bible gives us of heaven is a place of perfect love. The reason it will be a place of perfect love is because our experience of God's love will be perfect, no longer stained or marred by sin in our lives. As a result of being perfectly reconciled to Him, we will be perfectly reconciled to each other.

John Newton, the author of the great hymn "Amazing Grace," talked about controversy that we sometimes have with other Christians in this life, and how to deal with a person who may even oppose you in error. He points forward to the hope that one day, even this person who you might be tempted to see as an enemy, will one day relatively soon be a completely close friend. Newton writes,

[Remember that] the Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore you must not despise him, or treat him harshly. The Lord bears with you likewise, and expects that you should show tenderness to others, from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little while, you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts; and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever.

That one quote has been hugely helpful in my life. When I have sometimes considered even other Christians as opposed to me or as offensive to me, I have thought, just as I have heard others say, "I don't know if I can ever be friends with that person." The reality is you will. We will. There is coming a day when every follower of Christ will be personally reconciled in Christ to one another, so we look forward to that day, and we live in light of that day.

Jonathan Edwards was once asked what makes the church on earth look most like heaven in eternity, and his answer was clear: It's love. D.A. Carson similarly said: "The greatest evidence that heaven has invaded our sphere, that the Spirit has been poured out upon us, that we are citizens of a kingdom not yet consummated, is Christian love."

What is distinct about Christian love? It can't help but to serve others in the present because it can't wait to see Christ in the future. Let's say it together one more time. *"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."*

Thank God for this kind of love that He has shown to us. May we come to be the table, be reminded of it, and thus be compelled to reflect it in our lives and in the church.

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