

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² 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. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

“What’s love got to do, got to do with it? What’s love but a secondhand emotion? What’s love got to do, got to do with it? Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?” Perhaps you’re humming the tune in your head now; those, of course, are the words of the refrain from Tina Turner’s chart-topping hit, “What’s Love Got to Do with It.” Clearly, she had been heartbroken and was pretty much done with love—dismissing it as just “a secondhand emotion.” That’s *her* attempt at the definition of love, anyway, which, if you think about it, is pretty hard to define.

Ask anyone what sadness is, what hatred is, or what joy is—anyone would have an easy time defining those emotions. But love? That emotion, that feeling, that inspiration that governs so many of our choices and serves as the backdrop for countless songs and movies and stories—yeah, that one’s kind of hard to define in just a few words.

Well, we don’t have to spend much time searching for the words to define love, because, this morning, our text does just that for us. Here, the Apostle Paul defines love so clearly that even the littlest child can understand it. We’ll find out just what love is today as we ask the question:

“What’s Love Got to Do With It?”

(Listen to Paul’s answers)

- I. “This is why it’s everything.”
- II. “This is how you are to love.”
- III. “This is what love does for you.”

Our boys like to wake up pretty early, typically a bit earlier than I am ready for. And while that used to mean that they would come in and drag me out of bed to help them with this or that, nowadays they’re more than capable to busy themselves with their toys or their Legos, they’ll even pour their own cereal some mornings. And it’s pleasant to lay there in bed and listen to your children happily playing in the next room. But as happens sometimes, I’ll pull myself out of bed when the peace of the morning is disrupted by some dispute over who gets to play with what toy. Toys can do that to people of all ages—at their best, they are tools for spending quality time and playing with other people. At their worst, those very tools become the focal points of division and anger.

And that was the problem at the church in Corinth. This congregation was like the child of a billionaire, so many gifts had been poured out on them by God in heaven. Gifts of prophecy, gifts of wisdom and knowledge, gifts of speaking in tongues—and then there were the gifts of prosperity and wealth; all of them, given by God to be used as *tools*, tools for building up the church in Christ. But those very gifts became the focal points of sharp division within the congregation. You see, self-important attitude had risen up among the members of the church there; many acted as if they had no need for anyone else. Many were using their own personal gifts exclusively for their own benefit and not for building up the church. The rich were neglecting the poor, members were suing one another in court, they were even taking advantage of the Lord's Supper by allowing the rich to eat their fill while the poor were left with nothing. And they were proud of themselves through it all.

I thank God that we're not like that! I'm grateful that we never have divisions, never look down at others with an air of superiority, never would think to use our gifts and blessings primarily for ourselves rather than seeking to build one another up along with the church. We'd never do that! Please note that I'm saying this with my tongue firmly planted in my cheek—because, of course, we do. We're no strangers to this self-important, self-serving attitude that takes the tools, the gifts, the toys that God has given to us and hoards them all for ourselves. And when we do that, it's a sign that we're missing something. We're missing love, just like the Corinthians.

Well, **"What's Love Got to Do With It?"** the Corinthians might have wondered. "Everything," Paul answered. After all, in the Apostle John's first letter, he explained, ***"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. . . We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."*** (1 John 4:7-8, 19-20) Our love for our neighbors is tied inseparably to faith in God; if you do not have one, then you do not have the other. Paul's point then is that even if you have the greatest gifts, are able to perform the greatest deeds that might be laudable in heaven—speaking in the language of heaven, understanding *all* of God's wisdom, having the faith to be able to move a mountain with just a word, even being burned as a martyr at the stake—but if you have not love, you're nothing. You can take all those and throw them in the trash.

Clearly, love is important. In fact, it's everything. We talked earlier about trying to define love, well, here's Paul's definition: ***"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."***

Certainly, these are some of the most well-loved verses of Scripture, even among non-believers. They're unoffensive, uncontroversial—and likely because of that, they're often chosen as a Scripture reading at weddings for both Christians and non-Christians alike. And they're a good choice since these words paint a beautiful picture of the type of love we all want to have. Now, when I've taken people through pre-marital counseling classes, I'll have them open their Bibles to 1 Corinthians 13 and read God's definition of love. But I don't have them read it so they can be filled with a warm fuzzy feeling about what marriage is like, I have them read it so they can hear God's standards for love.

And boy, are they ever high standards. It's pretty easy to figure out if you love in the way that God demands that you love; all you have to do is insert your name in this section anywhere you see the word love. Do it for yourself, and see if it sounds like it's describing you. ***"Sam is patient and kind; Sam does not envy or boast; Sam is not arrogant or rude. Sam does not insist on his own way; Sam is not irritable or resentful; Sam does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth."*** I am convicted. My wife knows better than anyone, that is describing me at all, and it's not describing you either. We might have varying levels of patience, but none of us rises to the level of being patient and kind in every situation. We might not act arrogant openly, but certainly within each of us is that me-first attitude that stems from arrogance. Insisting on our own way? Who among us doesn't think that our way is always best! Resentfulness, rejoicing in wrongdoing? Yes, that's us too. How many of us harbor resentment towards someone for some past slight and then rejoice when things don't go there way? If this is Paul telling us how to love using God's definition, then we don't love.

Perhaps you've heard it before, that in the Greek New Testament there are three different words for love that are used. There is *eros*, which is romantic love, or as we might say, "Being in love." Then there's *philos*, which is the love of friends, of those who share a common interest. This is the love of people who are not focused on each other but on some shared obsession, like a sports team or hobby. Then the third term for love is *agape*, which is fundamentally a self-disinterested love, a love that focuses not on what it's getting in a relationship but wholly on the object of its love.

I'll give you one guess as to which word for love is being used here in our text. Yes, it's *agape*, that self-disinterested, self-sacrificing love that cares much more for the needs of others than it does for itself. If you have *agape* love, then you are patient and kind, not arrogant, not rude, not insisting on your own way, not irritable—because you're focused on yourself or what you want. You would sacrifice yourself and your own interests for that of others, if you have this type of love. But if we look in the mirror, we see we don't have this, at least not for most people.

You know, Jesus walked the Apostle Peter through this test one day (cf. John 21:15-17), asking him if he truly loved Jesus with that self-sacrificing *agape* type of love. It was in the weeks after Easter, and He asked Peter one morning, ***"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"*** And He used that *agape* term, in other words, ***"Peter, do you love me even more than you love yourself?"*** And Peter could not answer "yes" along those terms. After all, it had been just a few weeks before this when Jesus was on trial (cf. Mark 14:66-72), and being asked on that night by the servants if He knew Jesus, Peter showed which direction his love was pointing by cursing and swearing that he did not know the Man. He was out to save his own skin; he was disinterested in any kind of self-sacrifice for Jesus.

And so, being asked if he *agape* loved Jesus, Peter answered, ***"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."*** Except Peter used the word *philos*, meaning, ***"Yes, Lord; I love you like a friend."*** Jesus asked him again, ***"Do you love me (with that self-sacrificing agape type of love)?"*** Again, came the answer, ***"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you (like a friend, like a brother)."*** The third time Jesus asked the question, He didn't ask if Peter loved Him with that self-sacrificing love; this time He used the word *philos*, ***"Peter, do you love me like a brother, like a friend?"*** Peter was convicted, he could not claim to love Jesus like that, just as we cannot claim to love Jesus like that. Our love for God and for our neighbor often does not rise to the level of *agape* love. We love ourselves.

This is how you are to love though, with this *agape* love. But the beautiful thing is that while Peter could not claim to love Jesus in a self-sacrificing way, Jesus *did* love Peter in exactly that way, and His love for you is the same. You know, we substituted our own names in for the word “love” earlier, let’s try that again, but this time use Jesus’ name. ***“Jesus is patient and kind; Jesus does not envy or boast; Jesus is not arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on His own way; Jesus is not irritable or resentful; Jesus does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.”*** Are all of those statements accurate? Absolutely. This is the way that God loves you. As Jesus once said, ***“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”*** (John 15:13) And that’s exactly what your Savior did. He came to earth to pay, laying down His own life, the ransom price to redeem you from your lack of love.

All of those statements, then, are true: Jesus is patient and kind, bearing patiently with you even as you struggle with the same sins. Jesus is not irritable or resentful, He does not regret sacrificing His life for yours when you would not do the same. Jesus does not rejoice at your wrongdoing, He rejoices when you lay wrongdoing before Him in repentance, and then He rejoices to forgive you.

Now, the last part of that section says, ***“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”*** However, I think our English translations kind of miss the mark here. A better translation might be, *“Love bears without limits, believes without limits, hopes without limits, endures without limits. Love never ends.”* The point isn’t that Jesus’ love is blind, but that His love is permanent. It’s a love which He had for you when He laid down His life, it’s a love He had for you when He rose so that you might live, and it’s a love for you which will continue on into eternity.

That’s the point of the last several verses of our text. Here Paul is showing us **what God’s love does for us**. Even the greatest gifts that God could give a person will come to an end—the ability to prophesy, to speak in tongues—those are tied to this earth. Even our partial and imperfect wisdom and knowledge of Scripture—that will come to an end. As Paul writes, ***“Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”*** The day will come when you will be able to look back on this life and get the full picture, you’ll realize that those moments when you wondered what God was doing—God had a plan the entire time. The plan was love. Eternity is also in view then in our last verse, ***“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”*** How is love greater than faith and hope? Because while faith is important now, we won’t have faith in heaven, because we will see God with our own. Hope is important now, but in heaven there will be nothing left to hope for, because God will give to us all that we’ve been hoping for. But love, specifically God’s love for you? That will never end. God’s love will follow you all the days of your life, and it will follow you throughout eternity as well.

So, **“What’s Love Got to do with It?”** Tina Turner asked. We could ask the same, and the answer would be “everything.” But perhaps a better question would be, **“What’s God Got to do with it?”** And again, the answer is everything. He has everything to do making up for our lack of love; everything to do with nailing our self-love to the cross in true, self-sacrificial love; and He has have everything to do with your hopes for eternity, where He promises His love will abide forever. Let us thank God for His love, let’s ask that He helps us to love, and let us look forward to the day when both our love for God and God’s love for us are experienced in ways we can’t even imagine. In Jesus’ name. Amen.