

The Greatest of These Is Love

God has truly been good to His people! He has given us more than we ever deserved. Think of it! He provided a means of salvation that will save the vilest sinner. He has given us so many precious promises such as He will never fail or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5); He will supply all of our needs (Philippians 4:19); He will never allow Satan to take us from Him (John 10:28), although He will not force us to stay with Him; and the list goes on and on. When a person comes to the Lord in obedient, saving faith, he is given spiritual gifts so that God can use him in the work of His Kingdom (1 Corinthians 12:7). Much more could be said about this matter, but I think it is plain to see that God has been good to us! Yet, as I was thinking about these things, I came to realize that the greatest gift the Lord has ever given to His people is His love, and the manifestation of this love was brought to fullness in Jesus Christ and His supreme sacrifice!

The love of God for His people is everlasting (Jeremiah 31:3). His love is what motivated Him to send Jesus to die on the cross (John 3:16). In fact, the greatest evidence of the love of God is the death of Christ on the cross (Romans 5:8). God's greatest gift to us is His love.

Now, He did not stop by just giving His love to us, He has also placed His love in us. Jesus said that the world would know we were His disciples by the love we have one for another (John 13:35). Our love is an identifying characteristic that we belong to the Lord. You see, love is the first characteristic mentioned by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 when he lists the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit. Not only did God love us, but He has also caused us to love!

Here was one of the primary problems with the church in Corinth, to whom this letter was written. They were manifesting every other spiritual gift in existence, but they were not manifesting love one to another. You see, chapters 12-14 cannot be divorced one from the other. In the original, they are one unit. It is a call for more Christ-likeness and spiritual maturity in the midst of childishness and fleshly living. Paul writes these great words to remind the Corinthians that of all the great spiritual things they can do, the greatest spiritual exercise is love. The effect of these words is to remind us that we might possess all kinds of spiritual gifts and abilities, but that we are never more like the Lord Jesus Christ than when we love the right way. Now, with all that in mind, let us turn to this passage for a while this morning and talk about God's greatest gift to His church.

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of Angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And 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. ³If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 [ESV])

Paul speaks here on the primacy of love. The whole idea of these verses is that love is superior to everything else we can be or do! You may be a great speaker, but that is no substitute for love. No matter how great your oratory skills, or how beautiful your speech, or how brilliant your rhetoric, without love you are simply a clanging cymbal.

Have you ever been to a cymbal solo? I can assure you it is not very exciting. No matter what you say, nor how you say it, nor how accurate it may be, without love it is just noise. Without love, talk truly is cheap.

You see, great oratory skills can move a person's emotions. Great rhetoric can move a person's mind. A great speech can move a person's will, but only great love can move a person's heart. Oratory can move one to tears, but only love can move one to Jesus.

The bottom line is this: These were the same instruments used in heathen worship. Therefore, the person who exercises his tongue in a spiritual fashion yet does not do so with the love of God in him, that person is no better than a heathen worshiper. In fact, his worship is man centered and not God centered!

Love is superior to the spectacular. This verse mentions several spectacular abilities. But, even if a person was able to do all of these things and he did not have the love of God in his heart, he was nothing!

Love is superior to the sacrificial. We can give away everything we own. We can even give up our bodies on the altar of martyrdom, but if we do so without love in our hearts, it is a waste of time and it does not profit us one bit. The emphasis is clear! When love is absent, the Christian is no better than a heathen. He is nothing. He can expect nothing. Regardless of what others may think of our abilities and our gifts, without love, it is all a waste of time!

In verses 4-12, Paul gives an in-depth description of love. He reveals all of its characteristics to us. These are truths that we need to be reminded of continually.

⁴Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

In verses 4-6, Paul details love's properties. Paul shows us the many sides of true, Godly love. As if love were a great and brilliant diamond, he holds it up before us and reveals its many facets. As he does, the Person of God is revealed in each gleam of light from the surface of love.

Paul says love is patient and kind. Even when provoked, true, godly love is long-tempered. This characteristic of love reveals the truth that love does not

retaliate! Stephen is an example of this type of love in Acts 7:54-60. The greatest example is that of the Lord Jesus who endured His mock trial and went to the cross on our behalf. This kind of love endures all attacks.

One of Abraham Lincoln's most outspoken political enemies was a man named Edwin J. Stanton. Stanton called Lincoln a "low cunning clown" and "the original gorilla." He even said this: "It is ridiculous for people to go to Africa to see a gorilla, when they could find one easily in Springfield, Illinois." To Lincoln's credit, he never responded to these insults. Yet, when he was elected President, Lincoln chose Stanton to be his Secretary of War. When asked why, Lincoln said, "Because he is the best man!" Later, when Lincoln had been assassinated, Stanton stood by the coffin which contained Lincoln's body and said through his tears, "There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen." Patient love in action won this man over in the end!

Paul says love is kind. This word refers to active goodness that goes forth in behalf of others. Genuine love is never hateful or mean, but it respects others and reaches out to them.

The supreme example of this kind of love is God. He is kind to people despite their treatment of Him, as Paul brings out in Romans 2:4 [ESV]: ***"Or do you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"***

Love is not envious. True love is not jealous over the abilities or possessions of others. Instead of being jealous when others prosper or excel, love is pleased when they do well.

Jealousy is one of the vilest of sins that we harbor in our hearts! It was Eve's jealousy of God that motivated her to take the forbidden fruit. It was jealousy that put Daniel in the lion's den. It was jealousy that put Joseph in that pit! Yet, Godly love does not get jealous. Instead, it is pleased when others do well!

Love is not boastful. Love does not brag! It does not draw attention to itself or to what it is doing. A person who must be the center of attention and is hurt when he is not is a person who is not walking in love!

Love is not arrogant. Love is not proud. True love realizes that God has given all it has and all that it is to it. No matter how great our talents or how spectacular our gifts are, everything we are is the result of divine grace.

Love is not rude. It does not behave unseemly. It always treats others with compassion, consideration and respect! Love controls the emotions. It is not friendly one day and rude the next. Genuine love always makes Jesus look good!

Love does not insist on its own way. True love is never selfish and self-centered, but it is actively interested in what will profit others. It never looks at itself first, but it always considers another person ahead of itself.

Jesus is the prime example of this attitude in action. This is how each of us is to be.

Love is not irritable or easily provoked. True love keeps no record of evils done to it, but it willingly endures all slights and injuries. This characteristic of love reminds us that love does not demand its own rights! It is willing to yield to the will of another. True love only responds in anger to that which angers God! All other things are handled through forgiveness.

Love is not resentful. This phrase means it **“takes no worthless inventory.”** Two thoughts are in mind here. First, genuine love does not attribute evil motives to people. That is, every action is not seen in its most negative light. It thinks the best of others. Secondly, genuine love does not keep a record of evils done to it. In other words, it does not dwell upon what others may have done.

Often what we think happened did not even take place! Most of our hurts are perceived hurts. We just think it happened that way. That is why we must learn to treat others like the Lord treats us. We must treat them with grace and forgiveness.

Real love does not: 1) Remember injury; 2) Believe all it hears about another; and 3) Look for fault in others! If these attitudes were practiced in the church, it would solve about 90% of any church's troubles.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Love does not rejoice in sin. Whether it is its own sins, or the sins of others, love hates sin! Love does not rejoice when another falls into sin! Whether we will admit it or not, there is a part of us that is glad when another believer falls because we think it makes us look better. That is why we just have to tell someone else about it. True love does not gossip or rejoice when another believer falls, but it hurts with the injured member!

Love rejoices with the truth. While love hates all forms of evil, it loves the truth! It rejoices when truth is proclaimed and when truth wins the victory. Love is glad for the truth, even when the truth hurts. Love is glad when truth wins the day!

Do these things describe your life this morning? If you are walking in love they do!

In verses 7-12 Paul describes love's persistence. These verses tell us of love's staying power. Love is a remarkable thing that never flags nor fails!

⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love bears all things. Love patiently endures and overlooks the faults in others. The word “**bears**” literally means, “to cover.” Instead of parading the failures and faults of others before the entire world, love covers them over and continues to love in spite of those things! This was the example of God and His Son Jesus. This was Peter's testimony.

An example of this kind of love comes to us from the history of England. During the reign of Oliver Cromwell, a soldier had been sentenced to die. His fiancé pleaded with Cromwell to spare his life, but the great ruler refused. The young soldier was to be executed when the curfew bell sounded, but when the bell-ringer pulled the rope, there was no sound. The girl had climbed into the bell tower and had wrapped her body around the clapper, thus preventing the bell from sounding. Although she was battered and her body badly bruised and smashed, she managed to climb down. When she stood before Cromwell and told him what she had done, he immediately commuted the sentence of the soldier. Love bears all!

Love believes all things. What this means is that love always places the best possible interpretation on everything that happens. It does not always seek the most negative answer, but it believes that good will triumph in any situation. Basically, love trusts, love believes and love has confidence in the one loved.

Love hopes all things. Love always expects the best possible outcome. Love refuses to accept failure. Love always holds out hope that things will work out right in the end. Many have backslidden loved ones. Love does not give up on them. Love believes the day will come when they will come to God and things will be made right. Love just does not give up!

Love endures all things. This is a military term and means that love does not give up the fort! It stands its ground and continues in spite of everything that can be thrown against it. It continues in spite of persecution and ill treatment. Love bears the unbearable, believes the impossible, holds onto the incredible and never gives up. The word **stop** does not exist in the vocabulary of love!

⁸Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹When 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. ¹²For 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.

At the conclusion of 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul's great dissertation on love, he writes, **"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."** (1 Corinthians 13:13 [ESV]) The value of faith in the life of the believer is undeniable. There is no disputing the fact that every heroic biblical character was an individual who exhibited great faith, whether it was Enoch, Noah or Abraham. As the Hebrews writer tells us while referencing the Old Testament great figures of faith, **³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword.** (Hebrews 11:36-37 [ESV]) Throughout the harshest of treatment, they and others, such as Paul, all fought the good fight, they finished the race, and they kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7). Without faith, there would be no salvation. Without faith, we would remain forever lost. Without faith, we could never be pleasing to God. The Hebrews writer tells us in Hebrews 11:6 [ESV], **"And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him."** Many times we hear of individuals coming to faith in Christ and living a life of faith. Hebrews 11 is dedicated to lauding those who displayed great faith in God. Without faith, we would remain forever lost in our sins because we would never come to Christ, and without faith, we would remain living in disobedience to Him. Faith often motivates us to move forward even when the odds are against us. In a sense, then, we can see how faith is closely related to hope, and this connection is particularly brought out in Paul's letter to the church in Rome: **¹Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit Who has been given to us.** (Romans 5:1-5 [ESV])

It is hope that keeps us going when the situation we face seems impossible. It is hope that brings the expectation that we will obtain something specific we desire. Think of how life would be without hope. Hope is a gift from God that can bring joy in the midst of very difficult circumstances. Hope is what encourages us that victory is not only possible, it is imminent, and it is the hope that God will keep His promises that brings about **"the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding"** (Philippians 4:7 [ESV]). The reason, though, that love is the greatest of these is that it was love that motivated the Father to send His only Son to die for us (John 3:16). Without love, there would have been no redemption for mankind. Not only would we be without love, but without the redemption that was precipitated by love, there would also be no faith, and no hope. Nothing else matters without love. It is foundational for every other good thing in our lives, and that is the point Paul brings out in his great chapter of love.