

“Love: Say Yes to the Mess”
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Series: Share Week 4 Share Love
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The most famous definition of love in the Bible is I Corinthians 13. It describes a love that is so much more than flowers, chocolates and romantic comedies, a love that lasts even in the stress and mess of life.

Whenever I read this at a wedding something bizarre happens. I call it the attack of the Wedding Zombies. The minute I read, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love I am a resounding gong and a clanging cymbal” the bride and groom’s eyes glaze over, their faces go blank, their mouths drop open. I know why they go zombie on me. They don’t understand what the words mean. Sure these words are about love and that’s why it’s good for weddings. But I Corinthians 13 is not really about a wedding. It’s actually about a church fight – a quarrel between Christians in a city called Corinth. It’s not so much about saying Yes to the dress, as saying Yes to the mess of life. It’s saying Yes, I will love you in the mess, in spite of the mess.

Today I will lead you through the whole chapter verse by verse to explain its meaning. There is an outline of the passage with space for notes. My hope is you will apply these lessons of love in your life.

First the background. Corinth was a rich, cosmopolitan place. One of the most important cities in the Roman Empire, Corinth sat near an isthmus through which most business and merchandise flowed. William Barclay says in the city there were,

...ex-soldiers, philosophers, merchants, sailors, freed men, 400,000 slaves, tradespeople, hucksters and agents of every form of vice.¹

The Corinthians listened to the latest philosophical fads. They indulged every kind of pleasure and luxury and were known for wild living. Even in religion, they were over the top. The Greek author Pausanias mentions twenty-six pagan shrines and temples in Corinth which included a thousand temple priestesses who served Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Today we would say they are victims of trafficking. You can see why they might have a skewed view about religion and love.

Paul started the church in Corinth around AD 50 during the year and a half he stayed there. After he leaves, the believers start fighting each other. They argue about many issues and form factions. They compete over who is the most spiritually mature and who possesses the best spiritual gifts. Some say they’re superior because they speak in tongues. Others brag they can prophesy and predict God’s will. A third group shows off advanced intellectual knowledge. A fourth boasts they can perform miracles. A fifth

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, p. 4.

argues the true mission is to help the poor. A sixth group is willing to die as martyrs for the Lord. These factions are fracturing the fellowship. Paul is hundreds of miles away. He has one chance to stop them from shattering.

So he writes I Corinthians. In Chapter 12 he describes the church as the Body of Christ and every member is a vital organ in that Body. Spiritual gifts, the things they brag about, are the tools God gives to build up the Body of Christ not tear it apart. In Chapter 14 he focuses on worship. Spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and prophecy belong in worship but again they should build up the Body of Christ not cause chaos and confusion. The Corinthians have plenty of spiritual gifts. The missing ingredient is love. He puts love in the center in Chapter 13. It is the high point of his whole letter. Let's look at the passage.

Without Love, All that's Said and Done Equals None (Verses 1-3). Paul begins with the problem. Each group is boasting about their impressive spiritual gifts. So he lists these gifts.

- The Gift of Speaking in Tongues: This is a heavenly language used in prayer.
- The Gift of Prophecy: Prophets know and announce God's will.
- The Gift of Faith: They claim to have enough faith to move mountains.
- The Gift of Giving. These give funds to help the poor and will even give their lives.

Now all these are *good* gifts from God. They are miraculous. Any pastor would be thrilled to lead such an incredibly gifted congregation...except for one thing. The Corinthians are doing the right thing for the wrong reason. They leave out the most important ingredient: love. Paul puts each spiritual gift in this pattern: If I...but have not love...I am.... The point of each sentence is: you can say and do the most miraculous things but if you are doing it without love, it's just annoying, noisy, nonsense, nothing.

Are you doing the right thing for the wrong reason? Are you saying or doing something without love? We often cover selfish motives with selfless reasons.

"I'm doing this for you" but it's really for me.

"I'm working these long hours for the family" but it's really to build my ego.

"I'm buying these things because I love you" but I'm really trying to buy your love.

"I'm doing this for your own good" but it's really so I can control you.

Even in the church, we can serve in many ways but without love. We can help the poor, teach Sunday school or youth group, lead a growth group or worship service, preach sermons and go on mission trips but there's no love in it. Buried under these good deeds are selfish motives. We might do it to impress people, to take control, to stop feeling guilty, to boast about our spiritual maturity, even to earn God's love. According to Paul,

the result is always the same: without love, all that's said and done equals none. The sermons are hollow, the worship service is a performance, the mission project is motivated by guilt, the growth group becomes a clique, the church grows cold.

Love is more than the motive. It's the power that helps our spiritual gifts lift off. So what is love? **Love Cares and Shares Without Caring about My Share (verses 4-8)**. The middle section of chapter 13 is the very peak. It's the definition of love. Paul spends more time defining what love is not. You can see that visually by looking at the indented column. He starts by saying positively that love is patient and kind.

Next, Paul launches into eight negative descriptions. Most of these describe the way the Corinthians are acting. Let me give a quick definition for each.

- Envy – wanting what others have. It leads to rivalry and competition.
- Boasting – Promoting yourself over others and putting them down.
- Pride – This literally means to be “puffed up.” Today we might say someone is full of him or herself. A balloon might be filled with hot air but it's really empty. Paul says we need to deflate ourselves so we fill up with love.
- Rude – This refers to doing shameful things – the kinds of things you hide from others. It's following selfish desires even though it hurts your loved ones.
- Easily angered, keeping record of wrongs – Explosive anger extinguishes love. So does silently smoldering with grudges, resentments and passive aggression.
- Delighting in evil – Competitive people celebrate when others fall or fail. When we do this we are cheering on the work of Satan.
- Self-seeking – I saved this one for last because it sums up all of them. Hate is not the true enemy of love. Selfishness is.

All eight focus on me. How can I get my share, my way, my wants?

The positive descriptions of love – patience, kindness, rejoicing, protecting, trusting, hoping and persevering – all center on someone else. They involve caring and sharing with others. Take a moment and look at the eight negative terms. Do you find yourself slipping into any of them? Now look at the positive words. How are you doing at practicing them? In a fight do you magnify why they are wrong? Or do you ask, “Where am I wrong and what can I do to care and share with them?”

Now that Paul has reached the peak with this definition of love, he starts down the mountain into application. He asks the question we ask kids - **Love: What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up**. People ask me, “What's God's plan for my life?” Here it is: When you grow up God wants you to be love. Everything you say and do leaves the impression of love. Paul uses three images.

Temporary/Permanent (verses 8-10). Paul circles back to the spiritual gifts they are fighting about – prophecy, tongues and knowledge. Each one will come to an end because they are only temporary. They will cease, be stilled and pass away when we finally meet Jesus. It's like saying, “Why do you want to fool around with two tin cans

and string when you can have the iPhone 15?” Stop boasting about your tin cans, tinker toys and training wheels. One day all those things will go to the dump. God has something much better in store for you.

Childish/Mature (verse 11) He then compares tongues, prophecy and knowledge to baby talk, childish thoughts, juvenile ways. Those are fine for a kid. But eventually you grow up and grow out of them. God has something much better in store for you.

Blurry/Clear (verse 12) The city of Corinth was known for the mirrors they made. But these were simply a piece of bronze polished to a shiny reflection. It was great when you first received it but like all bronze it became dull over time. Right now, you see yourself as a blurry image in a bronze mirror. But God has something much better in store for you.

One day you will see Jesus face to face. You won’t need tongues, prophecy or special knowledge. You won’t even need faith or hope. You will clearly see Him and know Him. And you’ll find He has known you all along. Reflected in His face you will finally see yourself – the real you, a child who is loved beyond belief. You’ll find when all is said and done, the only thing that really matters is love.

You don’t have to wait until that day. You can start growing up now. Start practicing love now. Puncture your ego. Put aside selfishness. Start caring for and sharing with someone else. It may be the hardest thing you ever say or do. But it will be worth it.

Jean Vanier is the founder of the L’Arche communities, a movement that provides dignity and care for people with special needs and mental handicaps. He once shared a story about a love that says Yes to the mess:

I know a man who lives in Paris. His wife has Alzheimer’s. He was an important businessman—his life filled with busyness. But when his wife fell sick, he dedicated himself to caring for her. I went to Paris to visit them, and this businessman who had been very busy all his life said, “I have changed. I have become more human.” I got a letter from him recently. He said that in the middle of the night his wife woke him up. She came out of the fog for a moment, and she said, “Darling, I just want to say thank you for all you’re doing for me.” Then she fell back into the fog. He told me, “I wept and I wept.”²

Jesus loves you in the middle of your spiritual confusion. Love others as they walk through a deep fog. You will grow up into the person He created you to be. You will become love. And at the end of your days, when all that you’ve said and done is done, the last impression you will leave is love.

² Stanley Hauerwas & Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World* (IVP, 2008), p. 66