

**“Love, Sweet Love”
I Corinthians 13
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Introduction

In our series on I Corinthians, we now arrive at the most familiar of all the chapters. The pronouncement of “love” in Chapter 13 is the favorite of many and we often equate it with weddings. “Love is patient, love is kind...” It reminds me of Jackie DuShannon singing,

What the world needs now is love, sweet love.

It's the only thing that there's just too little of.

What the world needs now is love, sweet love,

No, not just for some but for everyone.

It sounds so simple and romantic. It has the making of a sweet Hallmark card, but I assure you Paul was not sending a sugar-coated greeting card to those stiff-necked members of the new church in Corinth. This passage is fine to use in weddings, and the virtues of love are surely what we need in our marriages, and yet, this passage is not about a romantic love at all. In fact, it may be more about loving those in your community that you don't like at all. Let's listen to the Word of God:

The New Testament Lesson: I Corinthians 13

For sure the essence of the Christian faith is simplified in one word, “Love.” It reminds us of Jesus' own words:

“The greatest commandment is to love God and your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30f)

“Greater love has no one than to lay down one's life for a friend.” (John 15:13)

“Love your enemies. Do good to them.” (Luke 6:35)

“For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son.” (John 3:16)

“If you love me, tend my sheep.” (John 21:17)

And many scriptures attest to the foundation of love such as I John:

“God is love.” (4:16)

“We love because God first loved us... Whoever loves God must also love his brother (or sister)” (4:19, 21)

And Paul in I Corinthians also reminds us that love is the essence of life. If you want to judge the worth of life, measure it in terms of love. It doesn't matter how much you know, even about the Bible; it doesn't matter how courageous your faith is; it doesn't matter how morally pure you are - even if you give all you have to the poor. If you don't have love, your actions are worthless!

Paul describes love as patient and kind—in other words, love is the faithfulness that we have seen in God over and over. Then, Paul reminds us what love is not, and he pretty well describes the Corinthian church members: Love does not envy, it does not boast and is not proud. It is not self-seeking or rude or keep account of wrongs. Love is the antithesis of the way that church was acting. Paul challenges them to grow up and put away childish ways.

That is all easily said and clearly understood, but I want to pitch a definition of love that challenges us, today, in this church. I claim Paul's definition of Godly love is deeper than we often consider. Love is not a feeling. Love is a way of life. It is the motivation behind our actions. All we do is hollow unless it is motivated by love. To put it simply, I claim that:

Love is using our power for the common good of others!

You may want to argue. True, this passage doesn't say anything about power, but let me expound as we consider God's love and power and the common good of our society.

First of all, how loving is God?

To answer this, let consider God's power first. How powerful is God? You say "all-powerful." So, what does scripture tell us?

God created everything that exists. God created the whole universe out of nothing. No one else can do that. God therefore created every living thing and every single person whether they acknowledge Him or not. Then, since God is so powerful, how loving is God?

Think of Psalm 8: “When I consider the moon and the stars, the work of your hands, who am I that you would consider me?” It is amazing that the most powerful being in the universe would care about mere specks like us and that that God would use this power to make us a little less than the angels and give us abilities to do incredible things. God has put all things in this world at our feet to be used and cared for. That is the core of love—God uses his powers not for self-serving or narcissistic wants, such as the mythology of Greek gods. God only uses power for the good of human beings and the common good of the created world.

In fact, God is so loving that He became a mere speck of a person so that He could relate to us personally. God cared enough to give up his power and become limited as one of us so that we could come to know him personally.

So, how loving was Jesus?

Well, once again, first of all how powerful was Jesus? Jesus could do miracles like turning water into wine. He calmed the storm and caused the wind and waves to stand still. Jesus healed people with dreaded diseases like leprosy and even caused a little boy and a little girl and his good friend, Lazarus, to rise from the dead. What doctors can even do that? Jesus had the same power as God. And yet, Jesus never used his power for himself. Think about it:

He refused to turn the stones into bread when he was starving in the desert.

He patiently taught his disciples and never boasted at knowing what they could not understand.

He allowed the church leaders to criticize and accuse him without a defense.

He laid down his defenses and mounted no offence when the soldiers whipped him, and pounded the nails into his hands.

If Jesus was the Son of God, surely He had the power to stop this evil! Surely, he could have defeated the forces that prevailed against Him. However, as the letter to the Philippians states, “He did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself and became a servant.”

Jesus refused to use his power for self-serving reasons. His power is reserved for the common good of others. God did use his power to raise Jesus back to life, not for the sake of the Son, but for the sake of saving the world. The love of God is not self-serving. God shows his love by using his power only for the common good of all His creation.

Love is the using your power for the common good of others.

So, let's turn the focus on ourselves? How loving are we?

And first of all, how powerful are we? We pretend to be modest or maybe naïve. Most of us would say,

“I'm not powerful.”

“I don't have much money”—look at Bill Gates.

“I don't have much influence”—look at President Bush.

“I don't know much.” --look to Steven Hawkin

“I can't do much.” --just look at someone like Mother Theresa.

And yet, Jesus Christ, himself, claims he has given us the keys to the Kingdom. We have received the power of the Holy Spirit and will do even greater things than He has done. Jesus claims we are more powerful than we care to admit. **So, how powerful are we?**

Most of us would not claim to have much money. We're not rich. But compared to 3/5 of the world who live in poverty we are. Haven't you seen the email?:

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep ... you are richer than 75% of this world.

If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

And if you get an email on your own computer, you are part of the 1% in the world who has that opportunity."

That is most of us. We don't think we have much, but over this last month, I've seen the houses of friends in Guatemala, Mexico and Brazil that make me look rich. With our resources we have more power than we may realize. Just look at what we have done together. We can raise a budget close to \$3 million dollars every year. We can raise the money to build an incredible extension to our campus

in order to make disciples of our future generations. Beyond our church budget, when a need is obvious, I've seen you respond. A few of you put a friend in Belize through seminary. A crowd of you have sponsored children to go to school in Guatemala. When a wheel-chair ramp was needed in a member's home, some of you just pitched in and built it. When a widow's roof collapsed in Guatemala, with the spare change in some of your pockets, you gave her a dry home once again and new pots and pans.

Don't underestimate the power in your financial resources as small as you may think they are. We do have financial power.

Maybe a greater power however is not in what we have, but the abilities and creativeness we possess. I cannot fathom how this sanctuary was designed and built. I can understand how someone could picture the final product, but to figure out how much steel and bricks and nuts and bolts and sheet rock and put it altogether, that is beyond my abilities... However, some of you know how to build homes and churches and office buildings and expansive projects. Some of you plan and build whole cities. That is an incredible "power."

Some of you have the ability to heal. Doctors and nurses will tell you it is not their power and yet they have the skills to cure cancer, to eliminate deadly infections, or to revive us from a catastrophic car wreck. Many of us or our family and friends would not be here if it were not for the skills of a physician or surgeon. That is an incredible power some of you have!

Some of you can analyze and organize. Others can motivate and sell ideas and products. Some of you can arbitrate and settle disputes. Some can patiently care for the elderly, handicapped or young children.

Some of you can teach. The only way anyone can learn to dream these visions and achieve the reality is through the skills of a caring teacher. Do you realize the potential of what people can be taught to do? Sometimes I envy our young people in high school and college. You have an opportunity that we often take for granted. In the last month, in Guatemala and Brazil, I have seen hundreds of kids whose families would give all they have for their child to go to school. Even going to elementary school is not possible for many of these kids. Those of you in school have the

opportunity to learn incredible things—to create what the future will look like, designing our cities, taking care of the sick, teaching others, providing for your community.

Don't underestimate yourselves! You, or rather we, are quite powerful!

And yet, the greatest power we possess, is not our abilities. It is not how much we have, or whether we can build or heal or teach or preach, or whether we know more than everyone else. The greatest ability human beings possess is to use our power not for ourselves or for our family but for the sake of others. The greatest human trait above all is our ability to love!

Let me push the concept of love even further: the greatest love is to use our power for the common good of those who have little power. Throughout history, God has lifted up the people who suffered and were oppressed. God saved the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. He continued to provide for them in the desert and the land of Canaan even though they often refused to show him gratitude.

Jesus used his power for those often abandoned by society: those who were poor, diseased, and even the immoral cheats and prostitutes.

And so, we are challenged with the use of our power. Whom will we love? Those who can pay us back? Those who can offer us some reward? Is our power something that we ultimately use to serve ourselves? **True love uses power for the common good of others, and especially those with little power to help themselves.**

Last month a number of us were fortunate to have a dinner celebration with Mama Carmen and 60 of her orphan children in Guatemala City. We learned how this woman has become known as the “Mother Theresa of Guatemala.” When her son was only 15, he ran away from home. Mama Carmen went searching for him. All around Guatemala City she was aghast at the number of homeless children. After a few months, she discovered that her son had been killed. In her grief, she realized she could do nothing to save her son, but she used what little resources she had to save the orphans she had discovered. She brought them all into her home - 60 children of all ages into her small home. In time the government discovered this and tried to shut her down: there were too many kids for one residence. They aired the story on the media in order to shame Mama Carmen's home

and force her to shut down for the inadequate facilities she was providing. Yet, because of the attention, a donor gave her a larger house. Today, there is still no adequate room. One bedroom in her house has three bunk-beds wall to wall. Three to four preschoolers sleep cross-wise on each lower bunk and two elementary kids sleep on each upper bunk. Nearly twenty children are in a room smaller than my son's own bedroom. Mama Carmen and her family use whatever strength and money they have to take any child off the streets and give him or her a truly loving home. Everyone of these kids were well fed, dressed, clean, polite and grateful. Mama Carmen is a model of the true love of Christ, using what power she has for the common good of others.

Last week, I was in the presence of another example of this love that Paul is challenging the churches to demonstrate. Andrade is a friend of mine in Fortaleza, Brazil. He is a chemistry professor at the university and an elder at the Presbyterian church. Andrade is from a small community toward the interior of Brazil. From all I could see, the community consists of a small church building next to his parents' modest home along with a few homes scattered along a dusty road. It is a three hour drive from the city. I cannot imagine how Andrade escaped this poverty and became a PhD.

About ten years ago, Andrade felt the grace of the opportunity he had to go to school and achieve his level of success, so he wanted to give back to his home community. He started going back to his parents home and playing with the children on weekends. Then, they asked him to tutor them. This became an informal weekend prep school and seven students passed the national exam to enter the university. Only 4% of students in the country pass this exam allowing them to go to the university for free. Then, 80 students wanted that same education. So, every weekend Andrade and some students from the University traveled back to instruct.

A few years ago the neighboring community heard of this. They too asked Andrade could he do the same for them. He realized that he only escaped the hopelessness of poverty by the grace of God, so he granted the same offer to them. Now, there are eight campuses, over 500 students and 70 graduates in the university. And this weekend prep school has no paid teachers. Andrade expects all those who pass the exam and enter the university to be on the bus each weekend to go back and teach in their home communities. Once they have received the gift of an education, the gospel

compels them to use this power for the common good of their communities. That is the love, sweet love we are talking about!

That is the kind of church Paul is calling the Corinthians to be and for us to be. To use our gifts and talents for the common good. The purpose and meaning of all life is judged by how well we love. The measure of our church is not how well we can preach or sing or teach or build or even how much we give away or how many mission projects we can tackle. The measure of our success is seen in how much we love. Love is our motive to use our power not for ourselves but for the good of the whole—the whole of the church, the whole of Roswell, the whole of our nation but also the whole of the world, and especially the poor and those who tend to be forgotten.

What the world needs now is Love, Sweet Love, but it's not a romantic notion. Often, it's not even pretty. The scenes may break your heart. But it is a love that is God's sweat and blood and tears for the sake and for the good of his whole world. So, seek faith, hold onto hope and earnestly love; these three, but the greatest of these is love!