

## **The Greatest of These**

### **1 Corinthians 13**

We've been talking about spiritual gifts and how important they are – all of them – and how God has given each of us gifts to use in ministry to encourage, build up and strengthen the church. And there's a lot of that happening at East Lincoln. People are plugged in, using their gifts, and doing a lot of great ministry. Doing ministry is very important. It's what we've been called to do. We were reminded last week at our missions conference that we've been called to make disciples of all nations and we do that as part of a supportive community of believers, each with different spiritual gifts doing ministry to contribute to the team.

But there's something even more important than using our gifts that we need to give our primary attention to as a church, and if we don't, everything we're trying to do will be useless. Ministry will be ineffective. We won't accomplish what God has called us to do and the church will fall apart.

Back in the summer of 2007, there was a road construction project on the I-35 bridge that went over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis/St. Paul. (Picture) The bridge was getting older, so joints needed repair, lighting needed to be replaced, and repairs were needed on some of the concrete and guardrails. So construction crews shut down half the lanes and brought in a bunch of equipment and materials on top of the bridge to do the work. Crews and workers were doing different jobs for a few weeks to complete the important work that had to be done.

But then something shocking happened. During the evening rush hour on August 1<sup>st</sup> as people were driving home after work, the entire bridge collapsed. (Picture) 111 vehicles went down with the bridge sending their occupants and construction workers down as far as 115 feet to the river below. 13 people were killed and another 145 were injured. It was a shocking event. How could something like that happen?

In the investigation that followed, it was discovered that there were major problems with the structure of the bridge. Multiple inspections and reports had been done prior to the collapse and city officials knew that the bridge needed to be replaced. But rather than dealing with the massive underlying problem, the decision was made to delay replacement and proceed with the surface repairs

instead. That decision ended up with 300 tons of construction supplies and equipment on top of the weakened bridge – far heavier than the normal weight of passing cars, even during rush hour, and the bridge couldn't handle it. The whole thing collapsed. They focused on important repair work that needed to be done but neglected the most important work on the structure and the bridge fell apart.

Something like that can happen in the church. In fact, I think something like that is threatening many churches in the world today. Christians are busy doing a lot of important ministry to keep churches going but seem to have neglected something underneath that's even more important, and if we don't pay attention and make it a priority, churches are going to fall apart. In fact, I think it's already begun to happen. The pandemic has placed a heavy strain on churches and revealed an underlying weakness. Today we're going to see what that is and my prayer is that we'll take it very seriously in our lives.

The church in Corinth was placing all kinds of importance on spiritual gifts, especially gifts that involved more unusual behaviors. So Paul reminded them that all the gifts are important and every person is needed for the health and strength of the church. But Paul was concerned about something even more important that he saw lacking in the Corinthians believers, so after expressing the importance of the gifts, he reminds them of something else...

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. (including 12:31b)

*And I will show you a still more excellent way...*

*<sup>1</sup> If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

The emphasis Paul makes in these verses is that there's something way more important than spiritual gifts, and that's love. He mentions several areas of giftedness that they thought were so important and says that even if you're the most gifted person in those areas it doesn't matter if you don't have love. Your giftedness is completely worthless without love.

You can be the most gifted when it comes to speaking in tongues, but if you don't have love, you're just going to be just an annoying noise that will drive people away. In the same way, you can be extremely strong in prophetic gifts – able to comprehend all mysteries and deep things of God, or you can have the gift of faith that is so powerful that you believe God to remove mountains. But if you don't have love, you are nothing. Your gifts are worthless. You can be the most gifted giver – to the extreme that you give everything away, even to the point where you sacrifice your very own body to be burned. And that giftedness will do you no good if you don't have love. All this fuss over spiritual gifts, but Paul says they're completely worthless if you don't have love. The church fails and collapses if we don't have love.

Therefore, what Paul is saying to the Corinthian believers is that if you're going to excel in anything, it shouldn't be gifts, it should be love. Love must come first, then ministry, or the church is going to fall apart. Love is most important. In writing to the Christians in Colossae he says in Col. 3:12-14: *“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,<sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.<sup>14</sup> And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”* Love is critical in the church. It's a big deal to God. If we're going to do what he's called us to do and live out the heart of what God wants for us, we need to excel in love.

Paul describes what love looks like in the church in the next few verses. And the description he gives has everything to do with how it was lacking in their church.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

If you think about all the problems he's addressed in the letter, you can see how his description of love would have been convicting.

- Love is patient and kind – which isn't what they were doing. They were arguing and fighting and taking one another to court.

- Love does not envy or boast – they were jealous and boastful when it came to using spiritual gifts.
- Love is not arrogant or rude – they were both in their fighting over meat sacrificed to idols.
- Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth – they were boasting about tolerating blatant sexual immorality in the church.
- Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things – they were turning on each other and harboring anger and resentment

Love is all these things, not what they were doing, and if they didn't repent and walk in the way of love, the church was going to fall apart – it was already starting. A bridge ready to collapse. All their gifts would be useless. Their ministry ineffective. Without love they couldn't do anything.

So Paul described what love looks like, but I want to talk a little more about what love is and where it comes from because “love” has a lot of different connotations today as it did back then. But back then there were several different words used for love. The one Paul uses is “agape. Leon Morris notes that was not commonly used until the New Testament – the Christian idea of love was a new idea. “Agape” was the quality we see on the cross. *“It is a love for the utterly unworthy, a love that proceeds a thought whether they are worthy or not. It proceeds from the nature of the lover, not from any attractiveness in the beloved. The Christian who has experienced God’s love for him while he was yet a sinner has been transformed by the experience. Now he sees people as those for whom Christ died, the objects of God’s love, and therefore the objects of the love of God’s people. In his measure he comes to practice the love that seeks nothing for itself, but only the good of the loved one.”*

That’s a different kind of love. It doesn’t have to do with the loveliness of the person or meeting the needs of the giver, but only the good of the one being loved. It’s not based on a person’s worthiness, but comes from something inside the giver. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15: *“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”* The love Paul had came from inside of him. It came from experiencing the love of Christ demonstrated on the cross – a love that Paul had experienced and, because Christ’s love was in him, he was able to freely extend that love to others whether they deserved it or not.

1 John 4:7-11 says, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

This is the kind of love that we as Christians, and we as a church, must show one another and place as first importance in what we’re doing, and that’s what Paul wanted the Corinthians to do. But it wasn’t happening, which is why that church was riddled with so many problems. Yes, they had powerful spiritual gifts, but what good were they if they didn’t have love?

He finishes by further emphasizing the supremacy of love over spiritual gifts, and everything else...

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

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

<sup>13</sup> So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Love is superior to spiritual gifts because love will never end. Spiritual gifts eventually come to an end. When “the perfect” appears, which is referring to Christ’s return, we won’t need them anymore because we’ll have him. Paul points out that gifts are just a partial revelation of Christ that have been given to the church. They’re like childish ways compared to the maturity of an adult. They’re like a dim reflection of someone in a mirror compared to seeing them face to face. When Christ returns, gifts will cease.

But you know what won't? Love. After gifts are gone, faith, hope, and love will remain, and you know which is the most important of them? Love. Greater than faith, greater than hope, Love is the greatest.

How important has love been in your life and in your interactions with people at church? If anything good has come out of the pandemic, I think one thing is that it has revealed that we need to grow when it comes to showing God's love to one another. It's easy to think we're a loving church when everyone is getting along and agreeing with one another. But when there's pressure, fear, and disagreements, it puts our love to the test. It shows us where our love is really at. And it hasn't necessarily been a strong point for most of us.

The elders came upon this passage at our retreat in February of 2020, just before the pandemic started. Little did we know how important Paul's words would be to make it through the next year and a half. Well here we are a year and a half later and the bridge is still standing, but how's your love for other people? Have you noticed your love is based more on whether or not you think they deserve it? Whether or not people agree with you? Or does it come from being overwhelmed by God's unconditional love in your life that you now freely show love to others whether they deserve it or not?

How are you treating the people who disagree with you? I've heard people say "I'm loving them by telling them the truth, even if they don't like it." There is a place for "tough love" but in most cases I see people using it as an excuse to dig in their heels and favor their own personal opinions, and that's not love. It's self-centeredness. *"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant<sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;<sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.<sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."*

How's your love? As we spend some time in worship, I encourage you to come to the Lord in humility. Think about the love he's shown to you on the cross and ask him to help you see where you might not be acting in love toward other people.