

“Love Makes You Real” 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

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Our Bible text this morning is 1 Corinthians 13. It is arguably the finest piece of ancient literature about love. Love is a busy word, especially during February. It's often misused and abused.

Lots of people who never crack open a Bible can actually quote parts of 1 Corinthians 13.

It's part of a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth.

Surprisingly, it's not a cheerful letter. You could say Paul spanked them with words.

Why did Paul do that? Some members of the congregation liked to show off their spiritual gifts. They wanted others to view them as the spiritually elite of the church.

The church at Corinth was sick. People were behaving badly. It was not a loving church.

- Most people don't realize that this magnificent piece of literature about love is actually part of a letter to a pigheaded church.

This is a glorious piece of prose on love. It's not sappy, moonstruck Valentine's card love.

Words about love can be just sentimental and cheap. This is unpretentious, no-nonsense love.

I imagine the Apostle Paul grabbing the Corinthian church by the scruff of the neck and making the people take a good, long look at love, saying, *Now that's real love! Kapish?*

Then Paul made them take an honest look at themselves.

He opened their eyes to appreciate the awesome qualities that make love real and strong and lasting.

Henry Drummond, a godly Bible teacher of the 19th century explained that if you take a beam of light and pass it through a crystal prism, the light that emerges from the prism is broken into its component colors—all the colors of the rainbow, or the light spectrum. School children learn this early in their science courses.

Drummond explained that love is like that. (*The Greatest Thing in the World*)

That illustrates what Paul is doing here in 1 Corinthians 13.

He shows us that when God's love comes into our lives, it is supposed to come out in all the colors or qualities that comprise genuine Christian love.

¹ *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*

² *If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*

³ *If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

⁴ *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.*

⁵ *It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.*

⁶ *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.*

⁷ *It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

In this little paragraph the Apostle Paul shows us some essential **marks** of authentic love that make Christian love radically different from what most people think of as love.

I. LOVE MAKES WHAT YOU SAY AUDIBLE (13:1)

Talk can be very cheap.

John Andrew Holmes said, '*Speech is conveniently located midway between thought and action, where it often substitutes for both.*'

So much that you hear isn't worth listening to.

But if someone really loves you, I think you're far more likely to listen to what that person has to say.

- Christians have always had a lot to say to the world.

It's the message Jesus Christ gave his followers. We call it the gospel.

It's good news about God's love for a world so corrupted by sin that people are trapped in a hopeless predicament.

The Bible calls it spiritual darkness, or spiritual death to give eternal life to all who place their trust in Jesus Christ the Savior..

We have wonderful news that God has acted to rescue people from a hopeless, horrible destiny.

Paul says if we're all talk and no love, our message of good news is nothing more than irritating blabber.

¹ *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*

Some Christians in the Corinthian church had the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues—in languages they had not learned.

They had the cockeyed notion that it made them more spiritual than others who didn't speak in 'other tongues.' Paul disabused them of that notion. He said, without love prophesying and speaking in other languages are just an unholy cacophony, an annoying din.

- Today it's cool to talk about "doing church."

I suppose that's okay, as long as we know that "doing" church is worthless if we aren't "being" the church.

God is far more interested in our character than in our abilities. That almost goes without saying, because apart from God we can do nothing of spiritual value.

A church can use hi-tech sound and video and have the most popular music styles, and that's all good. But unless the people truly love each other it's all just a huge waste of time and energy.

In the Corinthian church it was the sensational exercise of speaking in tongues.

Without love, God loathes it. It's just noise to him.

That's basically what Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand.

- Listen to what the Lord said about this sort of thing to his people through the prophet Amos: *'I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring me choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.'* (Amos 5:21-24)

God wants us to be the people we're supposed to be.

When a religious leader asked Jesus what the most important commandment was, Jesus said, *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these'* (Mark 12: 30-31)

Genuine love is what prompts people to listen. That's what makes them pay attention.

II. LOVE MAKES WHAT YOU DO CREDIBLE (13:2) Believable.

Love makes our actions for Christ's sake worthwhile.

² *If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*

I'm sure this offended the people who thought they were something!

A prophet was somebody special—someone respected. Prophets could say to the people, *"Listen up everybody. This is what God says,"*

People in the church also looked up to a brilliant teacher who could impress them with extraordinary theological insights in a Bible study.

And if you had the gift of faith so that when you prayed miracles happened—people would be in awe of you.

- People who have extraordinary gifts like that can be a huge blessing in a church. But without love, it all means nothing and it doesn't do the church any good.

Today we have Christian celebrities—Christians who have outstanding abilities as speakers, singers or apologists. I have great respect for many of them.

But in this letter Paul warns Christians to be careful. Without love all those "somebodies" are "nobodies" in God's sight. They're not representing God.

We need wisdom to discern if they are truly motivated by love for God and for people, and not by love of fame or money.

On a sunny spring or fall morning, if you stand on the side of your house that faces south, you feel warm. But if you go around to the opposite side where you're out of the sun's rays altogether, you shiver.

I think this is an analogy of what Paul writes in this verse. Some gifted people can be very warm and charming in the glow of public adulation, but away from the limelight they're cold and unkind. They may be frauds.

Integrity has been defined as who you are when no one is watching.

Love is what makes the little things and the big things you do credible.

- Christians in a healthy, loving church have learned to carry one another's burdens; they've had to forgive one another many times; and they have wept and rejoiced together.

When you've been through so much together part of you rubs off on each other. You love one another, and love has made you real.

How many of you have read Margery Williams' exquisite little story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*? If you haven't read it to your children or grandchildren, you really ought to do so. Let me cite the part where the *skin horse* is talking to *Rabbit* in the nursery: *'When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become REAL. . . . By the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off. . . once you are real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.'*

Love is essential in genuine Christianity. Real Christians have had a lot of skin rubbed off by caring for one another.

Love is not just talk. Love makes what you do credible.

III. LOVE MAKES WHAT YOU HAVE VALUABLE (13:3)

Some people are so devoted to a great cause that they are prepared to sacrifice everything, even their lives for it.

We are outraged when religious extremists blow up themselves and others for what they believe in.

Some call them heroes or martyrs; others say they are deluded villains.

- In this letter Paul also addresses extremism. He says it's worthless if it's not done out of love.

³*If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

Through the centuries religious leaders have tricked gullible people into thinking they can gain God's grace through acts of penance or by giving their wealth to the church.

- The truth is that God's saving grace is a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ. You cannot earn it and you cannot brag about having it. You can only receive it with humility and sincere gratitude.

In his letter to another church Paul wrote: *'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.'* (Ephesians 2:8, 9)

- Paul says here, *'Without love, all your generosity and sacrifices have no value. You gain nothing for all your efforts.'*

In one of the churches I served there was a woman that spent oodles of time at the church working on something or other. And she made sure that everybody knew about all the sacrifices she made. She didn't smile. She oozed unhappiness. Based on what Paul says here, she was wasting her life. She gained nothing from all her so-called sacrifices, except the reluctant thanks of people when she complained about how she worked harder than anyone else. Her life was empty. She had nothing of value to give.

- Sometimes we get the impression that what matters most in church is ministry, or serving. If you're serving the Lord, that's all that matters.

Serving is tremendously important. There's no denying it. But it's not the most important.

Love is first. If you are not motivated by Christ's love, you might as well scrap everything else. It's worthless to God.

It's love that makes what you have and what you give valuable.

IV. LOVE MAKES WHO YOU ARE DESIRABLE (13:4-6)

Love makes you attractive. If you love people you will never be lonely. You will always have plenty of company.

This is important because your love may help to make Jesus Christ attractive to others.

It's impossible for nasty, judgmental Christians to make Jesus Christ attractive.

Don't we all find ourselves drawn to a person who is patient and kind and supportive and humble and self-effacing, and polite, and considerate, and tolerant and forgiving and a paragon of integrity? That's love. It's magnetic.

- Let's look briefly at these qualities of love in verses 4-6. I confess that some of these don't come easily for me.

Love is patient,

The word in the original text is "longsuffering." The old King James Version renders this, *'Charity suffereth long.'*

It's said that *To be long-suffering one has to be long-bothered.*

That's why love is patient. It's love that doesn't give up on people who keep messing up.

Love is kind.

It means caring deeply and doing something about it.

By the way, if you are kind, you can expect to get hurt. Why? because you're willing to get close to people who are hurting. Sometimes people who are hurting will hurt you back.

It does not envy

Literally, ‘love is not jealous.’ It’s the same word for “zealous.” The context determines whether it’s used in a positive or a negative way.

Here it means resentment, begrudging others the good things that happen to them while nothing good seems to be happening to you. Love doesn’t do that.

It does not boast, it is not proud.

These two terms go together.

The first is a very rare word in Greek literature. This is its only occurrence in the New Testament.

It meant to be a “wind bag,” a braggart. It’s someone who is motivated by pride.

I think Paul included these because some church members loved to show off to the others how spiritual they were by displaying their outstanding spiritual abilities.

⁵ *It is not rude.*

Literally, it doesn’t act unbecomingly.

Christian love is sensitive to the feelings of others and treats people with respect.

It doesn’t snub or slight anyone in the church. Christians who love will show respect to those others try to avoid or ignore.

It is not self-seeking.

People who fixate on their self interests do not have love.

They’re so wrapped up with themselves that they can’t love anyone else.

They’re probably very needy. Life isn’t easy for them, and they don’t make it easy for others.

It is not easily angered.

It’s an interesting word, *paroxusmos*, from which we derive our English word, *paroxysm*, which means “a sudden outburst of emotion or action.”

The idea here is an uncontrolled outburst—blowing up at somebody.

Paul says people who love don’t have temper tantrums.

You always have to be on your guard in the presence of someone like that.

It’s like living close to an active volcano. There are regular rumblings and tremors and you never know when the thing is going to pop its top.

It keeps no record of wrongs.

Love doesn’t gather injustices and keep a running tally of wrongs.

Love doesn’t nurse a grudge.

Comedian Buddy Hackett said, *‘I’ve had a few arguments with people, but I never carry a grudge. You know why?’*

While you’re carrying a grudge, they’re out dancing.’

⁶ *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.*

Love never delights in bad things happening to people—even to bad people.

Oh, this is a challenge, isn’t it—not to get happy when someone who has been mean to you gets his comeuppance.

Love is on the side of goodness and fairness, and mercy, and justice.

People need love, especially when they least deserve it.

- Love makes who you are very desirable. True Christians are supposed to be known for their love. That’s what makes a church attractive.

V. LOVE MAKES HOW YOU RELATE RELIABLE (13:7)

Love is what makes people highly predictable—in the very best sense of the term.

⁷ *It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

This is love that gives people another chance after they’ve blown it. You feel that you can count on somebody who loves in this way.

Let’s look at the four ways Paul tells us in this verse that love is reliable:

1. First, this is love that protects. Literally, it “covers all things.” When you love, you “cover for others.” That doesn’t mean you lie for them, but you’ll take hits for them.

This is love that comes alongside and says, “Don’t give up, I’m here for you.”

James Thurber wrote, *‘Love is what you’ve been through with somebody.’*

2. Second, this is love that trusts. It’s not naïve, but it believes the best.

3. Third, this is love that never gives up hope. It reaches out to those who are discouraged and helps them believe that all is not lost.

4. Fourth, this is love that perseveres. It isn't turned off by ugly things that surface in the lives of other Christians. It perseveres in staying close and helping the struggler—even the perpetual struggler.

- God made us to flourish in a loving environment.

Do you know why some people are reluctant to love sincerely from the heart? A big reason is that kind of love demands a strong attachment. They're afraid something might happen to break that love attachment, and then they'll be hurt. They'll suffer painful loss.

It's easier not to love than to risk being hurt. Christian love is not cheap. There is a price. That's what makes it so valuable.

- We all need people who are reliable—predictable. They are always there for those who need them.

Love makes people reliable.

The Apostle Peter wrote, *'Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.'* (1 Peter 4:8)

- I have come to believe that understanding and practicing genuine Christ-like love is the key component in a healthy church.

That's because without it there is no health.

- I encourage you to excel in your love for one another. Jesus said his followers should be recognizable by their love.

Remember the five essential marks of genuine Christian love in 1 Corinthians 13:1-7.

1. When you teach or sing or when you interact, do you do it with love? That's what it takes to be heard by God, and to give something to others that isn't just worthless noise.
2. Has God blessed you with outstanding gifts and abilities? If you don't excel in love, even though others may admire you, God says it's not credible with him.
3. Have you been trying to earn God's approval by all your hard work and your great sacrifices that you hope people will appreciate, or by your generosity? Without love, all that investment will leave you spiritually bankrupt. It's not valuable in God's sight.
4. How did you measure up according to the checklist in verses 4-6? We all struggle with some of these. If we allow unkindness, arrogance, resentment, or judgmentalism to flourish in our lives, they squeeze the love out and others will avoid us. Our presence is undesirable.
5. Do you have the love that stands by people who have made a mess of their lives, and never gives up on them? Can they count on you? Are you reliable? How many times has our Lord done that for each of us? Where would we be without it?

Has God brought someone to your mind who needs you? Because of God's grace, you may be the one to reach out in love.