

What We Are Left With, In the End

1 Corinthians 13

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

February 14, 2010

Most of us have heard 1 Corinthians 13 read so many times at weddings – and seldom anywhere else – that we forget it wasn't written to celebrate romantic love at all. When Paul uses the word *love* he does not mean a mere feeling of falling helplessly into attraction to another person. Paul is not talking about hearts and flowers. He is not even talking about the love between husband and wife in particular. Paul is really talking here about love within the church.

If we don't have love within the church, we have nothing. That's where he starts. The problem Paul is addressing is the lack of love among people who are supposedly spiritual. In the church in Corinth, the gifts of the Holy Spirit – who is the source of our unity – had brought division and confusion and conflict with Paul himself. Basically, the famous love chapter is spoken not in a wedding but in the middle of a church fight. In the middle of his instruction in chapter 12 about unity in the body and the proper use of gifts, Paul calls a time out. He says, "Stop just a minute to remember what is really important, what is the one defining quality of the Christian life, what is the one thing that will last: it's love."

Of course there is love, and then there is love. Most of you know that Greek has several words for love where English has one. I don't believe in giving Greek lessons from the pulpit and I agree with C. S. Lewis that there is some wisdom in the English language's emphasis on the essential unity of our loves. They never really convinced me in seminary that God thinks in Greek. Nevertheless, most of you have heard the word *agape* which in Latin became *caritas*, which turned into the King James word *charity*. *Agape* is love that is like God's love for us, self-giving love, not because of any deserving or attractiveness on our part, but only because love is his nature. That is the love Paul has in view in this chapter. The Greek word for Valentine's Day love is *eros*, erotic love, which when it pulls its pants on goes by the name of romantic love. *Eros* is a word which does not appear in the New Testament at all, which should tell us something in a day when a lot of people act as if sexual love is the meaning of life.

C. S. Lewis (again) makes a basic distinction between two kinds of love: gift-love and need-love [*The Four Loves*, 1960]. The love we celebrate on Valentine's Day is need-love born of our desperate neediness and longing for one another. Frederick Buechner said in a sermon on "The Two Loves:"

If I were to produce a picture of *eros*, I would choose a little engraving by William Blake which shows the tiny figure of a man standing on the great curved flank of the earth's surface. It is nighttime and the man, with his arms outstretched, has his foot on the first rung of a ladder which reaches up toward the moon. Underneath, in block [print], are the words: I want! I want! [*The Hungering Dark*, Seabury, 1969, p. 83]

Our natural loves are like that, whether what we want to possess is a sweetheart or a box of chocolates or a Lexus. It's all about what I need. Gift-love is different. It is divine love, and it is possible only as God pours his love into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit. The *agape* love Paul is describing is gift-love, but that is precisely what he does not see in the church.

These believers in Corinth were spiritual, but they weren't loving. They were convinced that their spiritual experiences were proof that they had been elevated to a status above mere mortals. They could speak in tongues and received words of knowledge and performed miracles

of healing. But at the same time they were saying to other believers “I don’t need you!” They were sexually loose. They were fighting over food at the Lord’s Supper. They had chaos in their worship services.

One of the saddest discoveries of my teenage years was the discovery that real Christians can be so mean. I grew up knowing that there were nominal Christians in the church who were be bigots and liars, but it still shook me to see that some of the people who seemed the most spiritual – who knew the Bible cold and really knew how to pray, people I admired – could in the midst of controversy act utterly without love for their opponents. I told you already about being in church fights over the issue of race. In college it threw me for a loop when fundamentalist friends refused to eat with me because I ate with a student from Princeton Seminary, which they considered liberal. It wounded me in my thirties when I attended Southern Baptist Convention meetings and had fellow believers shout for me and Becca to sit down and throw things at us because we voted the wrong way on the issue of women in ministry.

Even in a church that appears as placid as Harbor Church, we all have our stories. Most of us have been on the losing end of a power play in church at some point in our lives. Sometimes it’s been about theology, sometimes it’s been about who just didn’t like us, sometimes it’s about politics, but most of us learn sooner or later that to some Christians there are things more important than love.

This is Paul’s point in verses 1-3: **Being spiritual but not loving is worthless.** Paul lists all sorts of religious activities that are good in themselves, but he says that without love they do no good. He begins with speaking in tongues because that was the main problem in Corinth. The Corinthians believed that they were speaking in foreign languages and even angel-languages. Paul says that even if you can do that, if there is no love in the church then it communicates no more than the gong in a pagan temple. Paul moves on to three other spiritual gifts: preaching and special words of knowledge from God and the gift of extraordinary faith which allows miracles to happen. He’s not making fun of these things. These are wonderful things we should all desire. They are genuine evidences of the Spirit. But if they are done by a person who is not loving toward others, then they are worthless. Verse 3 says that even if I am a radical disciple of Jesus and give away all I own to the poor, even if I “surrender my body to the flames” as a martyr, I’ve still missed out on the essence of the Christian life if I don’t act in love.

You can be faithful in serving on your committee, you can tithe or give even more than 10%, you can stand up for what’s right in the town, but if you are not filled with love for your neighbor and the people in this room, then it’s all wasted. Likewise, if there are people who are telling you that they are more spiritual than our church but they don’t act like they love me, they are just a bunch of hot air.

What is this love like that we are supposed to have? Verses 4-7 give us a description. This is not just a description of love in the abstract. It’s tailored to what is going on in the church in Corinth. Speaking to people who have been impatient and unkind to other church members, Paul reminds them that God’s love is patient and kind. God is patient with us – otherwise we would already be destroyed. God puts up with so much from us and is still kind toward us. Is that the way we act toward one another? The King James is actually more literal when it translates “Love suffereth long.” That’s the first truth about love that Paul lays out: love suffers a long time, it puts up with a lot. The Bible shows us that God’s love is like a parent’s love. When we are children we think patience is waiting for the TV show to start, but when we become parents we learn that patience is suffering long, waiting for a child to mature. God is a parent who

continues to suffer with us as he waits for us to put away childish things. Is that how we deal with one another in church when we see immaturity?

From this point on, Paul tells us mainly what love is *not* like, how love does not behave. You can tell from this list what was going on in the church in Corinth. The first five on the list have to do with being self-absorbed, which is the besetting sin of the super-spiritual. Here is what they were like: they were jealous (of other people's gifts), boastful (of their achievements in their spiritual lives), proud (of how spiritual they were), ill mannered (because they felt so superior), and self-seeking. Christian love is the opposite of all that.

The next cluster of phrases deals with how love responds to evil. What do we do when people hurt us? Listen: "Love is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, and does not delight in evil." Again this sounds like God. Remember what God said about himself when he revealed his name in Exodus 34:6: "Yahweh, the Lord, slow to anger and abounding in mercy." Colossians 2:14 says that God took the record of our wrongs and nailed it to the cross and did away with it. That's what love does.

Is that what we do with wrongs in our families and in our church? We live in a culture of grievance. We all have a complaint. We are all victims. We have all been wronged, and there is no end to seeking justice for ourselves. Once we start down the road of seeking our rights and seeking justice for ourselves, there is no end to it. It is a black hole into which we can pour our lives. Love takes the wrong done to us and nails it to the cross, and it is gone as far away as the east is from the west. Love lets it go, and love takes no pleasure in remembering the sin or failure of another person. Love finds no pleasure in gossip. This kind of love never gives up on people. It never stops trusting, never stops hoping, never stops hanging in there. That's the kind of love Paul had toward his heretical, immoral brothers and sisters in Corinth, because it's the kind of love God has toward us.

In verse 8 we come to Paul's final theme: **Love is what really lasts**. It's not merely that love is the highest good in a philosophical sense or that we will be judged on the basis of our love. Paul's message here is rooted in a vision of the future with Christ, and he sees that in the end all that will be left is love. Yes, he says, there are many religious things we do now, there are many evidences of the Spirit, but all these things are less than ultimate. However it is that you experience the Spirit – whether it's in praise songs or in old hymns, whether it's in ecstatic utterances or in silence – however it is, do not hold on too tightly to that experience. In the end, all those temporal expressions will pass away and what we will be left with – as if it had passed through fire – is pure love.

The Corinthians thought they had already become spiritually mature. The gifts were proof. Paul never puts down the gifts, but he says that they are not ultimate. He mentions three: preaching (his own favorite), then tongues and the word of knowledge (their favorites). All of these are temporary. They will all cease. Why? Not because they were only intended for the first century. Paul says that these gifts will pass away *when Christ returns*. When the perfect comes, the partial will disappear. Karl Barth put it this way: "Because the sun rises all lights are extinguished." Whatever gift you may be exercising now will pass away. Someday we will stand in God's presence, we will see Christ face to face, and all the stuff that is important now will be things of the past. What will continue into that new existence is the ability to love.

For now, we are all like little children. We have no choice about it. We act in ways that are appropriate to children. But when Christ comes and we are changed into our new resurrected selves, *then* we will be grown up. The things we held onto in this life with such fierce pride will seem like so many diapers and pacifiers. We just won't need them any more. All we will need is

love. When we see him face to face, it will be clear that all that we knew of God in this life was indirect, like the reflection of a person's image off a mirror of bronze. It will be clear to us how partial our knowledge was, but at that moment we will know God as completely as he now knows us. And when we know him we will be consumed in all our being with love for that God whose love for us we had scarcely begun to imagine. The reality of his love will wash over us and transform us.

Paul closes with a famous triad: faith, hope, and love. These are what the Christian life is about now. But only one will continue into eternity. Faith will become sight and hope will be fulfilled. When the end comes, we will no longer need faith or hope. But love will remain forever. Are you learning the one thing that matters? What we are left with, in the end, when everything falls away, when we see him face to face, is love.