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Sermon Series: *The Greatest of These*, No. 1 **The Greatest Is Love**

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1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have 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 do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have 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 does not dishonor others, 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.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

We're in 1 Corinthians 13 this morning, if you'd care to turn there with me. First Corinthians, Chapter 13.

Most people who are familiar with this passage, and especially verses 4-8, are familiar with it probably because they heard it read at a wedding. This is the number one Scripture passage read at weddings.

You know what the *number two* most popular wedding verse is? Proverbs 21:9 – *“Better to live on the corner of a roof than to share a house with a quarrelsome wife.”*

No, that's not true. I mean, that's not really the second most popular wedding verse. The *Proverb* is true...not that I would know about that, personally.

Anyway, 1 Corinthians 13 is the *most* read, and unfortunately, because of that, it's also probably the most-taken-out-of-context Scripture passage there is.

I mean really – Paul's talking about *love* here, not weddings. What does love have to do with weddings?

Seriously! Love really has very little to do with most weddings – at least the sort of love Paul is talking about here.

Don't get me wrong; Paul's kind of love has a *lot* to do with *marriage* – because *marriage* is all about things like *endurance* and *patience* and *perseverance*, plus a certain degree of *forgetfulness*. But you know – you can't really measure those kinds of things without some passage of time spent in proximity – in *close* proximity to someone else, you see?

That's why Paul's kind of love is proven in *marriage*, not in the *wedding*.

It's in the *marriage* where all the real action takes place.

I mean, just think, if it weren't for marriage, most men would go through their whole lives thinking they had no faults at all. But marriage corrects that.

It took years of marriage for a wife to realize and then say to her husband, “You know, I was a fool when I married you.” The husband replied, “Yes dear, but I was in love and didn't notice.”

It's marriage that teaches you things like the most effective way to remember your wife's birthday is to forget it just one time.

Love isn't proven in weddings. Love is proven in marriages – good marriages, anyway.

You can have a *very lovely wedding* without love. But you *can't* have a lovely *marriage* – the ongoing relationship – without love.

Which is really what Paul is saying here, not in the context of *marriage*, but in the context of the *church*.

You see, Paul writes this whole *beautiful* chapter, and those around it, in order to resolve a very *ugly* situation that existed in the Corinthian church.

And that ugliness was, in a word, *pride*.

You see, there were people – Christians, church members – at Corinth who were proud. They were proud of themselves, proud of their intelligence, proud of their abilities, proud of their positions, proud of their spiritual gifts and heritage, proud of their godliness (of all things). And they were carrying that pride into their times of corporate worship.

In their worship gatherings (of all places,) they were using their God-given gifts and abilities to lift up *themselves instead* of lifting up *Jesus*.

They were performing for their own glory – to make sure others noticed and honored *them*.

Paul speaks several times of this attitude – in chapter 1, beginning in verse 10; chapter 3; chapter 8; chapter 11 – and in that chapter – chapter 11 – he makes this devastating statement that *“when you come together for worship as a church... your meetings do more harm than good.”*

Can you imagine hearing that from the Apostle Paul? Why? Why did he say that?

I mean, these people were talented. They were *gifted*. They were smart. They were leaders. They were influential – capable – they had everything going for them.

Ah, but they were full of themselves, you see? And in all their puffed up, lifting up of themselves, they were stomping on each other – pushing each other down.

And when a body functions like that – when one part of a body is so consumed with being heard and seen and in charge that, in all it does, it pushes down and demeans and minimizes the other parts of the body – well, that body is never going to be healthy – it's never going to be right. It's never going to be all God designed it to be.

That's why Paul, there in chapter 12, uses the illustration of the human body.

If a human body goes to war with itself, it kills itself, because it's all attached – it's all connected.

When one part of it hurts, it all hurts.

And when one part is killed, it all dies.

And Paul says, the same is true for the church – the *body* of Christ.

If one part insists on dominating the rest – if one part insists upon exalting itself above the rest, not only will the rest of the parts suffer, but so will that rogue part, sooner or later.

And that's not the way God intended bodies – whether physical or spiritual – to operate.

That's not God's way.

What is God's way?

That's what Paul is describing here, you see? He even says there in the last verse of chapter 12, "*I will show you now the most excellent way...*"

The way to worship – the way to function as a church – the way to be married – the way to govern – the way to feed and nurture relationships and friendships – the way to live with God and others, Paul says, is the way of love.

Love is the *way*.

Love is not just another gift in some long line of spiritual gifts. It doesn't replace any of the other gifts or abilities that God gives.

Love, rather, is what makes all the other gifts of God work together, and in Paul's context here, he's talking about in the Church in corporate worship.

But besides that:

- Love is what makes followers of Jesus like us – who are different in so many ways – able to work and talk and function and serve together.
- Love is what makes the husband and wife work together in marriage;
- Love is what makes parents and children work together in families;
- Love is what makes societies work together in God's economy.

The functionality of the world at its best – as God designed it – depends on love.

In verse 13 there, Paul calls this "love" nothing less than "*the greatest thing*," which is a remarkable statement when you think about it. But it's true!

Not only is God a God of love – God *is* love, according to the apostle John.

And because *God is love*, everything that has His fingerprints on it was designed *in* love and *by* love and was made to work *in a context* of love – which means that nothing in heaven or earth will ever completely work as God created it to work *apart* from love.

Love is the very key to the Godly operation of all that there is. Love is the key element – maybe you'd say the *lubrication* that makes the mechanism of creation *operate*.

Like water is for our bodies.

When you get dehydrated, everything goes haywire in here. I thought I was having heart problems about ten years ago, and I went to Dr. Lamiy. You know what he told me? "Drink more water."

Water makes us work as we're supposed to.

Or – like oil to an engine.

Try running your car or lawnmower engine without oil. Well, no – don't do that!

But let me tell you – if you did, here's what would happen: it'd do OK for a very little while. But before long, it will start to get hot. And then, as all those metal pieces in there heat up, they swell up – they get bigger, and things that aren't really meant to rub against each other start to rub against each other, and they irritate each other, you see?

It works the same with groups of people, doesn't it? Or a family? Or a couple?

Things become bigger than they should, and then you get hot – and then irritated – and then angry.

Then what happens?

Then, you'll start hearing strange sounds – knocks and chatter, and then everything starts to run very roughly. It will start to shake more and more until, pretty soon, you'll hear a bang of some sort and something breaks. And then it's over – everything stops.

Sounds like our government, doesn't it?

It does! Because that's what happens when anyone or anything tries to function without love.

It happens in communities, in churches, in friendships, in families – and in marriages – that run out of love.

My dad told me, if you want your engine to run right, you need to check the oil every once in a while.

And if you hear anything strange – if you detect any sort of chattering or clicking or heating up – or you notice some decrease in performance, the first thing to check – not the only thing, but the first thing to check – is the oil level.

There is nothing more important to the right running of relationships than the oil of love.

That's Paul's kind of love – God's kind of love – love that is self-giving, self-sacrificing, others-centered. The sort of love that chooses the best for others, even at the expense of ourselves.

Love like Jesus was filled with – poured out for us.

God made the world – God made us to function together with that sort of love. Because of Jesus and what He did – what He made possible, God now wants to pour just that sort of love into every willing person – every follower of Jesus – if we'll let Him.

He wants His people to live as He created us to live – as agents of love – bringing this sort of lubrication to every relationship that touches us.

Can you imagine what the world would be like if everyone had this sort of love within them?

That's God's Kingdom right there. That's the way that the Church is to live – and to bring that Kingdom to the world.

How is your relationship-engine running?

Are things getting hot somewhere? Things rubbing you the wrong way? Are you, or those around you experiencing irritation?

Are you hearing strange sounds? Clicking, ticking, knocking? Breaking?

Maybe you need the Lord to top off the love in your heart.

He'd love to do that this morning.

So, the relationships in our lives will run as He meant for them to—

So, His Kingdom would come—and His will would be done in His world.

“Lord, would you fill me with this kind of love—your selfless, others-centered love, so I might have love to

show—love to share—love that would overflow into all those around me?”

That's the prayer to pray.

He's looking for open hearts this morning— hearts that are open to receiving the greatest of these...

Hearts that want to walk in the most excellent way.