



**“Nothing More Important”  
1 Corinthians 13  
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones  
February 3, 2013**

For many of us, when we hear 1 Corinthians 13, our minds leap to weddings. We picture statuesque bridesmaids holding their bouquets, dapper groomsmen in their tuxedos, adorable little flower girls prancing down the aisle and five year-old ring bearers tugging at their ties and wondering what all the fuss is about. We picture a beautiful bride in her long, flowing white dress gazing into the eyes of her fiancé. The two of them pledging their love to one another and promising to travel the years together as an inseparable couple.

1 Corinthians 13 is the Bible’s go-to text on love. Yet, when Paul’s letter was read to the congregation in Corinth, not a single person was imagining two young lovers pledging their devotion to each other.

Paul did not write these classic words on love while pondering a couple’s intimate feelings for each other. He was writing to followers of Christ who were engaged in a nasty conflict that threatened to tear their congregation apart. Paul was not writing to a community of faith like Westminster, where people care about each other and look out for each other and support each other when times are tough. No, Paul was writing to a church comprised of the Hatfields and McCoys plus the Campbell and MacDonald clans.

When we lift this passage out of Paul’s letter and let it stand alone, it certainly provides true wisdom for couples standing on the threshold of marriage as well as for couples who have been married 40 years. Paul’s words are a blueprint for a strong foundation on which a marriage can be built. However, if we read the twelve chapters preceding this one, we may gain an even greater appreciation of how important these words are to interpersonal relationships.

Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians, as he does all of his letters, with a salutation. However, as soon as he completes his typical words of greeting and thanksgiving, he brushes aside formality and gets down to business. Word has come to him that members are quarreling with one another and dividing into factions. He pleads with them to overcome their competing camps and to strive for unity.

In his letter, Paul tries different approaches to force them to look closely at how they are dealing with each other and to realize the need to alter their behavior before they devour one another. At one point, Paul even becomes insulting, calling them “infants in Christ.” He says “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now, you’re still not ready.” (1 Corinthians 3:2)

Paul berates them for tolerating sexual immorality and for acting as if freedom in Christ means anything goes. He is upset with them because when someone in the congregation has a dispute with another member, rather than trying to resolve it within the church, they run to the pagan courts to sue each other. He warns them to steer clear of idolatry and not to discriminate on the basis of income.

In the chapter preceding his chapter on love, Paul talks about individual spiritual gifts. He says that God gives some the gift of wisdom, to others the gift of prophecy, to some the gift of faith, to others the gift of speaking in tongues. But, Paul says, those who possess these gifts are not to boast that their particular gift is more important than other gifts. A church that has members with these various gifts becomes a powerful force when they complement one another and work together for the good of the whole. But that is not what is happening in the Corinthian congregation. People are elbowing one another for higher ground as they boast that their particular spiritual gift is more important than others.

In chapter 13, Paul finally addresses their quarreling over spiritual gifts and all that is dividing them into factions. He says, “Suppose I have the gift of speaking in tongues. If I do not love, my words are tantamount to a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy or wisdom or faith, but not love, I’m nothing. Even if I give away all of my possessions and make an extreme self-sacrifice, if I’m not loving, I gain nothing.”

At this point, you could hear the air seeping out of all of the puffed up egos who had been boasting about their spiritual gifts. Paul has said that if they do not possess a heart and soul of love, they might as well toss their spiritual gift in the gutter. Without love, the gift is useless.

Then, Paul describes the essence of what love is and what it is not. Love is patient and kind. It’s wonderful to be with someone who is thoughtful and positive and generous. Such people are easy to love. But loving someone who is loud and overbearing and rude requires a great deal of patience and kindness. When Paul told the Corinthians that love is patient and kind, I suspect they dropped their heads in shame, because they had been anything but patient with each other. And kind? They were cruel.

After highlighting patience and kindness, Paul lists the things that love is not. “Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on getting its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing.” In other words, Paul says that love is the opposite of the very things in which they have excelled.

In our culture, if you ask people to describe love, many will talk about romantic feelings or sentimentality. Paul mentions neither. He talks about love in terms of truly caring about the wellbeing of another and he recognizes those things that prevent people from loving – being overly focused on yourself, being envious of someone else’s good fortune, imagining yourself to be better than others, failing to show respect.

Next Paul rattles off the strength of love and how it will outlast any of their spiritual gifts. He says love bears, believes, hopes and endures. He says that all spiritual gifts will eventually vanish, but love will never end. Love hangs tough when storms blow in. Love withstands adversity. Love never stops believing that a breakthrough will come and a better day is possible. Then, echoing what he had said earlier about them being spiritual infants, Paul says, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” It was Paul’s way of saying “Grow up.”

In one of those articles that zips around the internet, someone sent me a piece on love. A group of professionals asked children between the ages of 4 and 8: “What does love mean?” Although they were children, their answers weren’t childish. In a few words they were able to grasp key elements of love.

One little boy said, “When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.”

A six year-old said, “Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.”

A seven year-old said, “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.”

One of my favorites came from a little girl who said, “If you want to learn to love better, you should start with someone you hate.”

The church in Corinth could have used a few of those children to teach the adults the power and necessity of love. Our ability to mature into the people God wants us to become is determined by how well we can extend and receive love.

In her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, physician Rachel Naomi Remen tells about a man named Dieter who is in one of her cancer support groups. Dieter had escaped from Communist East Germany, and after many years as a refugee he made a new life for himself. Now he is living with cancer.

He took a number of chemotherapy treatments, but after awhile he began to suspect that the treatments were no longer helping. He suggested to his doctor that he stop the treatments. But he asked his doctor if he could still come in to see him each week, just to talk.

His doctor replied, “If you refuse chemotherapy, there’s nothing more I can do for you.” So Dieter decided to keep taking the weekly injections just so he could have those few moments of connection and understanding with his doctor. When Dieter shared this with his cancer support group they became very quiet. After a period of silence, Dieter said softly, “My doctor’s love is as important to me as his chemotherapy, but he doesn’t understand this.”

Dr. Remen, the facilitator of his cancer support group, said his comments helped her realize that “Medicine is as close to love as it is to science, and relationships matter especially when someone is near the end of life.”

What Dieter did not know was that his oncologist was one of Dr. Remen’s patients. The oncologist had a weekly appointment with her in which he would talk about his chronic depression. The oncologist would say, “No one cares about me. I don’t really matter to anyone. To the hospital, I’m just another white coat, to my wife just a mortgage payment, to my son a tuition check. No one would notice if I vanished, as long as someone was there to make rounds and take out the garbage.” The oncologist was so caught up in a sense of failure because he couldn’t cure cancer, that he had become blind to the power of love.<sup>1</sup> He failed to understand that even when no treatment can cure, love can bring a degree of healing and joy and hope.

What impedes your ability to love with Christ-like love?  
Are you waiting for the perfect conditions to exist?  
Are you hesitant to love someone with whom you disagree?  
Do you wait for others to love you first?  
Are you afraid to love because you have been burned too many times in the past?

Near the end of the New Testament is the First Letter of John. The writer says “Those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.” (1 John 4:16). Fan the ember of God’s love in you so that it will burn ever brighter.

## NOTES

1. From an interview of Rachel Naomi Remen by Krista Tippett on *Speaking of Faith*, July 29, 2010.