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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## Keep It Flowing

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 9, 2022

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Our scripture text for today is one that you have all likely heard at one or more wedding ceremonies—maybe even your own. We will hear it again, but this time we'll try to understand it in an entirely different light.

<sup>31</sup>Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

**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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup>It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres...

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

1 Corinthians 12:31–13:1-7, 13



Perhaps the most hilarious wedding scene ever filmed was near the climax of the comedy classic *The Princess Bride*. As evil Prince Humperdinck is forcing beautiful Princess Buttercup to marry him against her will (and while Buttercup's true love Westley is racing to her rescue), the impressive-looking Bishop, resplendent in all his clerical finery, turns to face the assembled gathering. And then he begins to stumble through some of the most incomprehensible speech impediments you will ever hear.

Since I first saw it years ago, I have been sorely tempted in each wedding I have performed to have some fun with the wedding party by beginning our practice session at the rehearsal with: "Mawwiage is what bwings us togetha today. Mawwiage, that bwessed awwangment, that dweam within a dweam..."

### **The Context of 1 Corinthians 13**

It comes as a surprise to most people to learn that 1 Corinthians 13, in spite of its popularity in modern weddings, is actually not about marriage at all. Its context is very different. And if you read it carefully, you discover that it never mentions a wedding. When a groom and bride stand before me (he looking handsome in his rented tux with the funny bow tie, and she glistening in her \$2,000 dress), they probably hear only half of what I'm saying when I read this text, and are likely clueless to what the original intent was by its author.

These words are bookended (in chapters 11 and 12 before, and chapter 14 after) by a detailed discussion of how Christians are to get along with each other in the church—the ways we should treat one another in order to make a fellowship of believers operate as God intends it. And in the middle of those specific instructions the Apostle Paul gives us the key to all successful human interactions—what he calls "the most excellent way." If people were to put into practice what 1 Corinthians 13 tells us is the way to treat one another, there is no doubt that **every** relationship would go better. Every marriage would be happier, every home more harmonious, every church more mutually supportive, every business partnership more effective, and every team play better together!

## The Inadequacy of Our Language

The primary reason why modern Americans fail to understand the real significance of these timeless words of 1 Corinthians 13 is the limitation of the English language. The key word in our chapter is, of course, “love.” But love is a badly overused and abused word in English. It’s the only one we have, and yet it is required to stretch to mean so many different things (“I **love** my spouse ... peanut butter ... my country ... my dog ... the Hallmark Channel ... the Green Bay Packers ... my mother ... country music ...” and so on). Although people of the Bible seemingly lived in more primitive times, the ancient language they used was actually more advanced and sophisticated than ours today. They were wise enough to coin different words to express the different dimensions of love.

When we hear the beautiful, poetic words of 1 Corinthians in a wedding, we automatically assume that they are talking about **romantic** love. But they’re not. The author uses an entirely different word. It was a word that Jesus and His Apostles specifically chose to represent a wholly different dimension of love. It means a selfless, giving love—not one that expects to be mutually returned. It means a love that involves sacrifice. It is a pure and perfect kind of love. It is ultimately an expression of God’s character and His unselfish grace and kindness towards us. When the Apostle John wrote “God is love,” he did not mean to say that “God is romance.” The Lord’s love is of a different, higher level.

By no means do Christians look down upon the form of love that is romantic attraction and expression. When it is healthy, it is a wonderful source of joy in life. By no means do we denigrate the love of friendship, or the love of parents for their children and children for their parents. We absolutely celebrate the love of country, the tender affection we feel for pets, the enjoyment we take in sports and music and art and hobbies. But this kind of love the Bible calls us to emulate in 1 Corinthians is not an emotion. It is an action, a verb, something we choose to do (whether or not we feel like it). The highest form of Christian love is not a sentiment expressed on a Valentine’s Day card, but a commitment that never wavers or gives up.

## Loving Others

Let's look more closely at the actual words. In verses 1 through 3 we see the contrast between the talents and gifts God gives us and the way they are used. He has described some of these gifts in the previous chapter. Some people are gifted as eloquent speakers, some with intellectual skills, some with great wealth, others great courage. But if those talents are used for selfish purposes, they do nothing to bind people together. Without the unselfish sacrifice of true love and sincere motivation, they only drive us apart.

Then verse 4 begins a detailed description of what real love for others leads us to do, and what it stops us from doing. Half of these actions are positive ("do this"), and half are negative ("don't do this"). None of them are easy. All of them take hard work and practice.

It was years ago, and I was a college student and fairly new in my faith, still trying to figure out what it meant to live as a follower of Jesus. The campus Christian fellowship I had joined held a weekend retreat during the winter semester. We all went to a nearby conference center. The speaker at that event walked us through 1 Corinthians 13 in its true and accurate biblical context, and then he personalized it for us. He said, "I know many of you take pleasure in checking off your 'to do' lists each day. I know how satisfying it is to mark off your course syllabus when you've finished reading a textbook or writing a paper. But here is a daily **personal life checklist** I want you to do for the next week. At the end of each day, see which ones you can check."

So, imagine at the end of each day doing an honest self-evaluation through the lens of scripture:

- Was I patient today with other people who annoyed or irritated me?
- Was I kind to everyone I encountered today?
- Did I keep from envying, lusting, coveting or being jealous today?

- Did I act or feel prideful today?
- Did I put anyone down or mock anyone today?
- Did I act selfishly today?
- Did I lose my temper today?
- Is there someone I need to forgive who hurt or wronged me today?
- Did I always tell the truth today?
- Did I protect someone today?
- Did I trust someone today?
- Did I express hope and positive affirmation to someone today?
- Did I stick to my commitments today?

I've practiced this from time to time, and it can be very eye-opening!

### **An Impossibly Lofty Standard?**

When the lovely words of our text are read in a wedding, you can almost audibly hear the sighs across the congregation: "Isn't that nice?" But when you look at the details of how the Bible is telling us we are to act towards the other people in our lives, the more appropriate response is, "Isn't that **impossible!**" Indeed, it is very hard. The difficulty in living this kind of love is partly because all the people around us are imperfect, flawed individuals who have some things about them that are not very lovable. And the difficulty is also partly because we ourselves are flawed and selfish people for whom love does not come naturally.

So how can we possibly live up to this standard? If these words of 1 Corinthians are going to be more than pious platitudes, how can we put them into practice? I've been pondering this, and there are two things that have come to my mind. You could think of them as two keys. My parents once had a safety deposit box at a local bank. I went with my mother one day when she had to get something out of the box. She took our key, but the bank manager also had to use a separate key. Only when the two keys were inserted together into

the locks did the box open. Think of these as the keys that, together, unlock our ability to consistently love other people in a selfless way.

**The first key:** We need to know deep inside (and often be reminded, because we easily forget) that we ourselves are totally loved by God and completely secure in Him. By His grace, which we couldn't have earned but was given to us in Christ, we belong completely to our Lord. Nothing that happens to us can separate us from Him. And the moment we leave this earth we are in His arms forever. All our sins, if we've trusted in Christ, are buried at the bottom of the ocean. Because we are so completely loved, we are able to love others without needing anything back from them—which is necessary for true selfless love.

Picture it in this way. Imagine we are on a fishing boat or pleasure boat miles out in the Gulf of Mexico. You slip on a wet spot on the deck and tumble into the sea. I grab a round life preserver that is attached to a rope, and I toss the preserver to you while holding the end of the rope. If I want to pull you back into the boat, something must first happen: I must be securely held. Otherwise, if I reach down to try to pull you in, I may fall in myself. So, I will need to lean on a solid railing to anchor myself, or someone else on the boat will need to securely hold me around the waist. Then, because I am secure, I am able to rescue you. The spiritual application is simply this: If I am held securely by Christ's love for me, then I can give love to you freely and confidently. My deepest needs are already met. I am safe in His embrace.

**The second key:** Because we are imperfect and limited, we need to continually draw upon the love and the strength of God's Spirit in us to allow us to resist our natural self-centeredness and be able to give to others. None of us has all the perfect love we need within us. But there is an unending source for us to draw upon.

Perhaps this true story will be helpful. During the First World War, the British Army sent an officer named T.E. Lawrence (later known as "Lawrence of Arabia") to recruit and rally the nomadic tribes of the Arabian Desert to throw off the shackles of the Turkish Empire.

The Arabs finally agreed to help the British, and their efforts resulted in the capture of Jerusalem and Damascus.

After the war, Lawrence wanted to show the Arab chiefs the wonders of the Western world. He arranged to transport them to Paris with him. He expected that they would be awed by the architectural wonders of the Arc de Triomphe and Notre Dame Cathedral, but the Arabs had seen big structures before and were not particularly impressed. But when he took them to their hotel, something there caused them to be absolutely amazed.

They followed Lawrence into the bathroom, and when he turned on the faucet, pure water came out. What a miracle! They kept trying it, and it worked every time. Their experience with water had been that you had to haul it from an oasis or a well. The chiefs asked Lawrence where they could get one of these faucets to take back to the desert so they could always have water. He had to explain to them that the faucet itself wouldn't help. It had to be connected to an endless supply of water by a network of pipes before it could deliver the water.

### **Connected to the Water Supply**

We are like the faucets, intended to deliver the refreshing water of real selfless love to other people. But we can't do it unless we are hooked up to the water supply of God's love.

That is why we need to stay close to God. It's why we recommend that you pray daily, read Scripture regularly, worship with other believers once a week, and consciously yield your selfish will to God. That's why we pray, "**Thy** Kingdom come, **thy** will be done."

The Holy Spirit is the pipeline to deliver true love to us, so that we can then dispense it to the people in our lives. ■

