

"The Greatest of these is Love"
1 Cor. 13:1-8a, 13
2-14-10

Happy Valentines Day! According to legend, a Priest named Valentinus defied Emperor Claudius II's outrageous order to cease all marriages. In the midst of war, the Emperor reasoned that single men were better soldiers. Well Valentine, as we know him, thought this policy was insane, so he continued to perform marriages. And because of Valentine's defiance of the Emperor's edict and his dedication to the sacred institution of marriage, he was imprisoned. Legend has it that he fell in love with the jailer's daughter, and wrote notes to her from prison, signed "From your Valentine." He was put to death on February 14, 269, the day we celebrate.

Well since it is Valentines Day, I want us to look for a few minutes at the portrait of love that ought to grace the life of every believer and be the cornerstone of every marriage. So turn with me to 1 Cor. 13, where we find this incredible portrait of love. No poet has ever dipped his pen in ink and written the equal of 1 Cor. 13. Not Shakespeare, not Byron, not Shelly, not Keats, not even Browning with his: "How do I love thee, let me count the ways." How important is love and what does real love look like? Paul paints its portrait in 1 Cor. 13. Look at it with me (v 1-8, 13).

Listen, two things make Christianity different from every other faith. One: we serve a Risen Lord. Buddha is dead, Confucius is dead, Mohammed is dead, but Jesus is alive, Amen? We serve a risen Savior. Praise God for that! Two: When we receive Jesus, we have the love of God living in our hearts, and that makes us different from everyone else. A living Lord and a loving faith. That's what makes us different.

I. LOVELESS FAITH IS WORTHLESS

So Paul addresses this very gifted but loveless church at Corinth and says: "I don't care how gifted you are, if you don't have love, you're nothing, of no account, of no value. You're worthless."

A. Tongues: And he begins with the very thing they valued most at Corinth, the gift of tongues. He says: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels." I heard about a cat that chased a mouse into a hole in the wall, and the mouse sat there and waited for a while, and thought: "I wonder if that cat is still out there." About that time, the mouse heard: "Bow, Wow." So the mouse thought: "The cat must be gone because the dog is barking." So as soon as the mouse cleared the hole in the wall, the cat snatched him up, and said: "Nowadays, you've got to be bilingual." Seriously, Paul is talking about the ability to speak all languages, known and unknown. The tongues of men and of angels.

I have personally studied Hebrew, Greek, German, a little French, Swedish, Latin, and English-- and I have mastered NONE of them. But what if I was fluent in every language on the face of the earth? And not only fluent in every language but eloquent in every language. There's no place in the world I couldn't go and speak the language exactly, and not only would I be perfectly understood, people would be moved by what I said. I could look in the mirror and say: "Wow, I

am something." But Paul says: "Without love you are *nothing*." That's what he means by a resounding gong and a clanging symbol. In Corinth, pagan worshippers would bang gongs and symbols to get the attention of their dead, dumb deity. And Paul said, "Without love, your speaking in tongues is as worthless as trying to wake up a pagan god."

B. Prophecy: Paul goes on: "If I have the gift of prophecy, and can fathom all mysteries." What if I could predict the future with 100% accuracy? Or if I knew what the stock market was going to do and make investments accordingly? Or if I knew where the next 7 magnitude earthquake or Cat 5 hurricane was going to strike, and could avert a natural catastrophe? Or if I knew the whereabouts of Osama Bin Laden, when and where the Al Qaeda terrorist network is going to strike next, or when Iran was going to attain nuclear weapons and when they were planning to use them? The President of the United States would call me every morning and say: "Hey, Preacher, what's going down today?" After a few days of that, I could begin to feel awfully important and look into the mirror and say to myself: "I am something." Paul says: "If you know the future perfectly, and don't have the love of God, say it with me: "I am nothing."

C. Mysteries: And if I understand all mysteries. For 20 years as a pastor, I walked the halls of hospitals every week and watched people suffer. It is amazing how many people are dying of cancer, young and old. And I pray: "Lord, help us discover the solution to this mysterious and deadly disease." Brilliant men and women are studying every day, trying to unlock the mystery to cancer. Multiplied millions of dollars are being spent to help doctors and researchers solve this problem.

What if I could go to the American Cancer Society HQ in Atlanta, GA and announce: "I have solved the mystery of cancer." I would win the Nobel Prize for Medicine. Time, Newsweek, the New York Times and every newspaper in America, would be beating on my door, demanding an interview. FOX, CNN, and Network TV reporters would be stacked on my front yard like cordwood and camera's circling my house in helicopters. And after a week or two of that, I'd get the idea that: "I am something!" Paul says: "If you have the ability to solve all mysteries and do not have the love of God," say it with me: "I am nothing."

D. Knowledge: And have all knowledge. All knowledge. Think about that. I have attended 2 colleges, 2 universities, and 2 seminaries over a period of 12 years reaching from a Community College in Tennessee all the way to the University of Lund in Sweden where I finished my PhD. And I've found out that knowledge is kind of like the vastness of an ocean, because the more you know, the more you know you don't know. When you're a college freshman, you think you've got it all figured out, but I can tell you that by the time I did my oral exams for the PhD, I felt very inadequate and humbled.

But what if I had all knowledge? I mean in every field of study, I literally had all knowledge. I know there are some people who think they know it all and they are irritating to those of us who truly do, Amen? But in every field of knowledge. What if I knew enough about mathematics and physics so that I could embarrass the likes of an Albert Einstein? Or about chemistry to make a Linus Pauling hang his head? Or about astronomy to make a Stephen Hawking hide out? After a few days of that I would say: "I am something." But Paul says: "If you have all knowledge, and don't have love," say it with me: "I am nothing." It may be trite but its still true:

The world doesn't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.

E. Faith: And though I have all faith, so that I can move mountains. There have been people of great faith not only in the Bible but in modern times. I think of George Mueller who cared for 1,000's of orphans and raised millions of dollars without asking anybody for one red cent. You may have heard about the time his ship was socked in by fog, and he had a speaking engagement. The captain wouldn't move the ship, so Mueller prayed that God would move the fog. And he did, instantly and completely. Mueller had mountain moving faith. But if I have the faith of the Prophet Elijah or the Apostle Paul or George Mueller, if I have mountain moving faith but have no love, Paul says, say it with me: "I am nothing."

F. Giving: Verse 3, If give all I possess to the poor. If I had so much money that it would make the combined fortunes of Billionaires Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and Sam Walton's kids look like chump change, and I gave every penny of it to the poor, and then gave my body to be burned, but I did it without love, God would reject the ashes. Paul says: "If I give all I have, even to the giving of myself, and don't have love, I gain nothing." The bottom line is this. It doesn't matter how gifted I am, without love, I am nothing, I have nothing, and I gain...nothing!

Listen, the only motivation for Christian work and witness should be love--when we seek the highest good of another person--everything else is worthless. In fact, if the love of God is not evident in us, our home life, our churches, our work relationships, then we might as well not even name the name of Christ. Why? Because love is the essence of who God is. In fact, the Apostle John came right and said it: God is love (1 John 4:8).

II. LOVING FAITH IS WINSOME

Well then Paul gives us a full length portrait of God's kind of love, which in the Greek language is the word agape. There are actually 14 different colors that make up Paul's palette as he paints this portrait. And these are the characteristics that should mark the life of every believer, a life of love (v 4-8). For the sake of time, I'm going to pare it down to 10.

1. Agape love is Steadfast Love (v 4a): Love is patient, the KJV says: Love suffers long. God says: "If you have my love, you will be patient." Are you a patient person? A man spoke frantically into the phone, "My wife is pregnant and her contractions are only two minutes apart!" "Is this her first child?" the doctor asked. "No, you idiot!" the man yelled. "This is her husband!" A little impatient...

Are you patient with people when you are pressed? Are you patient with your colleagues at work? Are you patient with your children? Are you patient with your spouse? Are you patient with your family? If you are an impatient person, if you are quick to lose your temper, if you are quick to give up on people, then you don't love with God's kind of love, because love is patient, it suffers long. The Bible says of Jesus in John 13:1, that "having loved His own, He loved them unto the end" (v 1). Do you know what was going on? The disciples were arguing about who was greatest, but He put up with them, He served them by washing their feet, He was patient with them. True love is patient.

2. Agape Love is Serving love (v 4b): Love is kind. What is kindness, it is serving one another. Kindness is love in action. It is the ability to love other people who do not deserve to be loved. People who deserve love the least, need it the most. See, if you love someone, you won't give them what they deserve; you will give them what they need. Jesus said: "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that spitefully use you." What are you to do? You are to do good, speak well, and pray hard. That is you are to show them kindness, that's serving love. Kindness is a language that the deaf can hear and the blind can see.

3. Agape love is Sincere love (v 4c): Love does not envy. If you are envious of another person, it is because you don't love the person you envy. If I envy you, it is because you have something that I want and don't have. And if I want it, I don't rejoice that you have it, and if I don't rejoice that you have it, it is because I don't sincerely love you. If I cringe when you are praised, if I feel that your gain is my loss, then I don't sincerely love you. True love is sincere love. It rejoices when another is blessed, it is not envious.

4. Agape Love is Self-Effacing love (v 4d): It does not boast, it is not proud. Love does not put itself on parade. True love enables you to be humble. See if I love you, I can't look down on you and rejoice that I've got more than you. You can't love anyone and look down on them at the same time because true love is self-effacing love. Self-promoting Pride and Agape Love cannot walk hand in hand. You cannot be big headed and big hearted at the same time. True love is self-effacing love.

5. Agape love is Self-Restraining Love (v 5a): It is not rude. The KJV says: "It doth not behave itself unseemly." Do you know what that means? True love enables you to be courteous, to demonstrate good manners. Love is not rude. But this is the rude generation. Have you ever been around rude people? Don't look at your neighbor, look right at me. They elbow their way in, they don't want to wait in line, they don't know how to say: "Please," they don't know how to say: "Thank you." Since when has it become out of style to be mannerly? When has it become out of style to speak graciously, and respectfully. It is still in order to pull the chair out for your wife, before she sits down, not as she sits down. Its still OK to open the car door for her even if you've been married after 20 years--And all the ladies said: Amen! Usually when you see a middle aged man open the door for his wife one of two things is new: the wife or the car. And that is a shame, right ladies? Do you know what courtesy is? Its just love in the little things. And a person who doesn't love in the little things probably doesn't love in the big things. Love is not rude.

6. Agape Love is Self-Denying Love (v 5b): It is not self-seeking. It is not selfish. It doesn't say: "Me first." True love is self-denying love, it doesn't serve itself. During the Holocaust, a Polish Jewish mother, hearing the oncoming tanks of the Nazi's coming, ran into the woods with her 3 children. She stayed there for weeks living on roots and whatever they could find. One morning they were discovered by a Polish farmer, who saw that they were starving to death, so he demanded that they come out of the woods, and sent his son to get a loaf of bread. When he handed the bread to the mother, she ripped it in three parts, and placed them in the trembling hands of her 3 hungry children. Seeing this, the son said to his father, "She kept none for herself because she's not hungry?" The father replied: "She kept none for herself because she is a

mother. She will die to see her children live." Love is not self-seeking, it is self-denying. Like the Lord Jesus, who always thought of others before He thought of Himself. How are you doing so far?

7. Agape Love is Serene Love (v 5c): It is not easily angered. Actually, the word easily is not in the original. Love is not provoked. Love is not irritable, love is not touchy, love is not quick to take an offense. Do you know anybody who is like a shot gun with a hair trigger? Just rub them the wrong way, and boom, they blow you away. And they say: "Well I didn't really mean it; I just have a hot temper!" But there are all of these dead people lying around. Maybe you are like that. Do you know why you explode the way you do? There is not enough of the love of Jesus there to hold you back from firing off. If you want to know what you are full of, just see what spills out when you are knocked around a bit. And the one blot on an otherwise wonderful Christian character is often a quick temper. But true love is serene love.

8. Agape Love is Sacrificial Love (v 5d): It keeps no record of wrong. It is not a collector of grudges. Two guys were talking about their wives, and one said: "When we fight, my wife gets historical." The other guy said: "Don't you mean hysterical?" First guys said: "No, she gets historical...she recalls everything I have ever done that she thinks is wrong." Well true love doesn't "get historical." True love is able to forgive. And that costs. There can be no forgiveness without somebody paying a price. If you owe me 10 bucks, and I forgive it, it costs me 10 bucks to forgive it. Somebody has to sacrifice and pay the price. But so many of us are book keepers, and we keep a record of the wrongs against us. But true love is sacrificial love, it costs to forgive and wipe the slate clean.

9. Agape Love is Sympathetic Love (v 6a): It does not delight in evil. How is that sympathetic love? Because when somebody is in sin, when somebody falls, when somebody does wrong, you don't rejoice, you weep! Do you know what the sin of the gossip is? Basically, the gossip rejoices in evil. When they hear something bad, they can't wait to tell it! They are like the woman who said: "You know my motto is: 'Never say anything unless it is good,' and girl is this good!" Now this doesn't mean that we overlook sin; it simply means that we don't rejoice in it. True love is sympathetic love.

10. Agape Love is "Stubborn" Love (v 7): It always perseveres. True love keeps on keeping on. It never quits. I've told my wife that if she ever leaves me that I'm going with her. It is stubborn love. That is why we need to take divorce out of our vocabulary. Yes, I realize there is adultery, there is abandonment, and there is abuse, but the ideal is found in Jesus' words: Therefore what God has brought together, let no man separate (Matt. 19:4-6). Sometimes we throw in the towel too quickly. Sometimes we give up too easily. But remember the story of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer. She committed adultery again and again as a temple prostitute, and finally things were so bad she was about to be sold as a slave. And Hosea stepped in and bought her and then brought her back into his home as his wife. That is stubborn love. That is the way God loves us. He forgives us. He takes us back. He doesn't give up. That's why C. S. Lewis called him the "Hound of Heaven." He pursues us relentlessly. Love bears all things, it believes all things, it hopes all things, it endures all things. Love never fails.

Now that is the kind of love that ought to be true of every person who names the name of Christ.

It was true in the early church. They saw to it that there was no needy person among them, even if they had to sell some of their own possessions to meet the need. In a “me-first” world, that got the people’s attention. It is interesting when you look back at what unbelievers said about the early church. The thing that stood out in their minds is recorded in a letter from one Roman official to another. He watched these Christians relate to each other with agape love, and was astounded when he wrote: "Behold, how they love one another." Jesus said: "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another" (John 13:35). The world, and especially Generation Next (16-30), is looking for that kind of authentic love before they will buy into our messaging on other issues.

The church needs to show the love of Christ in practical ways, like participating in a Habitat build, serving in a soup kitchen, helping in a homeless shelter, volunteering at the Pregnancy Resource Center, helping with an AIDS hospice, going on a mission trip to serve people in need. When we show that kind of love, we have credibility when we speak about defending unborn life or fighting the homosexual agenda or opposing dignity-stealing programs for the poor, or whatever. Then it is not so easy for the world to call us “self-righteous” or “hypocrite” or make us into one dimensional people, who are easy to caricature, and burn in effigy. Demonstrating real compassion will make a difference with the next generation who only knows what we are against, not what we are for. They think that we are motivated by hate, but let’s surprise them with our love.

CONCLUSION

Now when you look at this full length portrait of love in 1 Cor. 13, you cannot help but say that this is a description of Jesus Himself. You could substitute the name of Jesus everywhere the word love is, and it works just as well. Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. You can just run the whole list and what you have is a full length portrait of the personality and ministry of the Lord Jesus. Question: As you look at this portrait of love in 1 Cor. 13, are these qualities present in your life? In your marriage? In your home? Listen, if Jesus is the source of love--the Bible says God is love (1 John 4:8)--then these qualities will become a reality in our lives to the extent that we pursue a warm, intimate, personal, passionate walk with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul said in Ephesians 3:18 that my overwhelming desire for you, is that you might be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height of God's love, a love that surpasses all understanding. During a time of intense persecution in the middle ages, a man jailed for his faith in Spain had carved the shape of a cross in the stone floor of his cell. And at the left hand of that cross, near the place where the bruised and bleeding heart of Jesus would have been, he scratched out: breadth. And over at the right hand, the hand that was pierced he wrote: length, and down at the nail pierced feet, he etched: depth, and above the thorn crowned head, he had written: height. The cross gives us the dimensions of the Love of Christ. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my love my all.

Prayer: God let us love you with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Let us love each other with your kind of love. Let our churches become loving churches. Teach us how to love those who are lost, those who are trapped in destructive lifestyles, those who oppose us. Teach us how to love our enemies, and when we don’t have it in us, grace us with it anyway. Let us love so

that the world may see it and be drawn to the Savior who is the source of it. In His name we pray, Amen.

-END

A pastor for 20 years and a pioneer leader in the values voter movement, Dr. Kenyn Cureton, former Vice President for Convention Relations for the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, currently serves as Vice President for Church Ministries with the Family Research Council in Washington, D.C.