

THE PRIORITY OF LOVE

Part 1

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1 Corinthians 13. I'd like to do a three part series on this great chapter in the Bible. This morning we will look at the first three verses on the theme the priority of love. Tonight I'd like to look at verses 4-6, the practice of love.

The New Testament does not take it for granted that simply because we've become Christians we automatically know how to love. We are told specifically how love functions and how to operate as people who love. Then next Sunday morning we'll look at the third in this series the Permanence of Love. Today the Priority of Love.

Dr. Thomas Malone of the Atlanta Psychiatric Clinic made this comment about our greatest need today. "In my practice sometimes people ask me what psychiatry is all about. To me the answer is increasingly clear. Almost every emotional problem can be summed up in one particular behavior. It's a person walking around screaming, 'For God's sake! Love me!'"

I think he hit the matter on the head. We all need love. We know the value of love for a baby and for a child. If a child is deprived of love they are going to grow up with some real problems that need some working through. It's fascinating to note that the emphasis of scripture is not upon our needing love as much as it is, once we've come to Christ, being persons who give love. The idea being that you only receive what you give and it is more blessed to give than to receive. The emphasis in scripture is not us wondering why no one loves us or not enough people love us or love us as intensely as we'd like. But the focus that the Lord would direct us to is to ourselves becoming loving persons. And that has a priority in our life.

To me a real statement that is a miracle of God's changing power in our lives is the fact that 1 Corinthians 13 was written by an individual who before his conversion would have had no more the lifestyle described there than the man in the moon. The Ayatollah Saul of Tarsus before Christ found him. But when Christ comes into our life a change occurs.

When we look at the subject of love and the priority of love I thought it might be well for me to spend a moment or two just looking at what we mean by the word love. Obviously the word love is very flexible in the English language. Love is a difficult word to get a hold of. Simply because in the English language we have one word that expands into so many different meanings. The New Testament helps us by giving us three words for love which have been used frequently enough they do not need much attention in this service.

Eros is not used at all in the New Testament because it came to stand for basically selfish love. It can also connote sensual love. *Phileo* is friendship love. *Agape* became a Christian word. It was not used hardly at all in classical Greek. It's as though the kind of love that Christ brought into the world was so powerful that only a new word could convey what was associated with it. This love came to stand for that which a person gives because they choose to give it. Not because it has been earned or merited or even responded to. But because it is the free act of giving that another chooses to give.

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Perhaps in an era that there is a great deal of emphasis upon romantic love in our western culture to contrast romantic love with Christian love. I'd note three things:

For one thing romantic love is anchored in the feelings and Christian love is more anchored in the will.

Romantic love says I feel great about you today and I love you. But when the feelings aren't there then the love isn't there. This is why we have such a great difficulty in homes and marriages and families today. We've bought this idea that somehow in order to be in love one has to feel those things.

In order for love to last it can not simply be on the feeling level. Every one knows that there are times when you don't feel like loving your kids, you don't feel like loving your spouse, you don't feel like loving your parents, you don't feel like loving fellow members of the body of Christ. Someone trying to define love in the modern sense has said, Love is a verb. Love is an action-oriented thing. It goes on independent of feelings.

A second difference between romantic and Christian love is that romantic love depends upon attraction. Christian love depends upon commitment.

It's easier to love people who are pleasing us and look good. It's easier to love kids that are well behaved than kids that are rebellious and flaunt every inch of freedom that they want. It's easier to love a husband/wife that is always caring and kind and thoughtful. More difficult to love one who is of the personality of one of the parents who they don't like. Christian love however is not based on attraction. It's based on commitment.

Romantic love the third different between it and Christian love is it flowers or fades on the basis of another person's response. But Christian love goes on drinking from the grace of God. God has poured out his love in our hearts and because of that we're called upon not to be ones who seek to be loved but called upon to be persons who go on loving, not letting our responses be conditioned by that of another.

I know that's difficult. I know that sounds pie in the sky. I know that sounds awfully utopian. But it is also Christian. God loved us while we were yet sinners. It's that kind of love that the Lord calls us to that 1 Corinthians 13 is talking about. Paul sets out the priority of love as it relates to five particular factors in verses 1-3. The Corinthian church was caught up with charismatic gifts, especially the gift of speaking to God in another language which had not been humanly learned. Other tongues, supernaturally given. They prized this as the sum good of the Christian life, to be able to speak in the tongues of men or of angels. That was the highest good, the greatest spirituality.

It is a wonderful thing to be able to speak in other languages. And the language of angels. And not because of having studied it but to have it supernaturally given to you.

Paul says if you don't have love but speak supernaturally in different languages, it's worthless.

He talks to those who study God's word and are prophets. A prophet is simply one who takes God's word and speaks it, makes it clear, plain, applicable. Fathoms all mysteries, understands

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all knowledge. To be a great Bible student and always be a person who can speak with theological acumen and could speak with insight and fever and power. I've known some people who've known the Bible super well and sometimes a massive ego gets in the way of all the biblical knowledge. Paul says, Though I have all this prophetic knowledge and insight and don't have love it's nothing.

He says "If I have faith to move mountains..." There is such a thing as faith that is loveless. We've had a lot of emphasis upon faith in the body of Christ in the last ten years or so.

Though I get it all, have it all, but have not love, it's nothing.

Paul says even benevolence can be substituted for love. "Though I convert all my possessions into bits of bread for the hungry." Suppose I sold everything I owned, gathered all the cash together and give it all away. I can give from the fact that I'd like to be recognized or I'd like other people's love or because I give out of duty and therefore I can negate giving because I'm not loving.

Even, surprisingly, martyrdom is not greater than love because you can die and it still is nothing if you've not died as a result of love. I've known people who are martyrs in their marriage. It's possible to be a martyr in marriage or family and do it not for the sake of love. But maybe for some twisted sense of psychological desire to punish yourself. All that martyrdom for nothing.

A super word of what it means to have love as a priority. "1 John 3:18 'By this we know love that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.' Lay down – I've had problems with these two words. It's easy to understand he laid down his life for me part. That's good and ok. But when it comes to the we ought to lay down our lives part that doesn't seem too good. I love you but I don't want to die for you. And I don't think you want to die for me. And I'm not sure it'd help a whole lot even if you did. And neither do I think we can explain it by saying, We must be willing to. In fact, as we get older the things that we're willing to die for get fewer and fewer. The young can die for all kinds of causes. But the things I'd die for are very few. And the people I'd die for are nearly none at all. That's true of you as well. 'Lay down,' means precisely what it says. In the laying down of his life, he did in fact give his life. But before he died Jesus laid down his life. The word 'lay down,' comes from the Greek word which means to place or to put. It means *just put it down*. Lay it down. He just put his life down for us. We ought to put our lives down for the brethren. Thankfully that does not mean go out and die but just go ahead and put it down. I'm not sure what all that means but I think I know a little of what it means to hold back. That helps and hurts. Sometimes I wonder what we are saving ourselves for. I don't like this any more than you do. It's just that I happen to believe that the Bible means what it says about some of those things even though we don't like them. I'm thinking of the man who all of his long life saved and saved and held back. You know, Don't loan, don't borrow – all it brings is trouble and sorrow. That was his life slogan. Don't loan, save. Take care of. All his life he worked and saved and when he was 64 he up and died. All of the saving, keeping, holding making, saving in his life was down the tubes forever. I'm not talking economics. I'm talking lifestyle that seeks to preserve, save, keep for what? The death average is 100%. We're going to die. We want to save ourselves and keep ourselves and hold ourselves back as though the highest goal life would be to look good in our caskets. It's no special blessing to come to the end of life with love unshared, selves ungiven, activities unactivated, deeds undone, emotions unextended. It's not an encouraging thought especially at

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my age in life. But I have the feeling that when a person is middle aged he ought to be about half used up. What am I saving myself for? Isn't it God's intention that when we come to the end of the line we're just about used up. Sometime between now and then we might as well be letting the candle burn for the light, the heat, the warmth and the sharing. As long as we're going to live and then die we just better live for Jesus and love and go ahead and let ourselves be used up."

I close with this living demonstration in our church family of love. David and Travis – father and son. Wednesday morning an operation took place. David gave his kidney to his 13-year-old son Travis. They are both doing well. I saw David and he's so excited about what's happened between him and his boy. After he greeted me he handed me a little card.

"On August 20, 1986 Travis received a new [then after the word "new" is an asterisk and at the bottom it says, "actually it's slightly used"] kidney named Clyde from his dad via transplant. We're pleased to announce that Travis, Dad and Clyde are all doing well. We would like to thank God for his blessings and thank you for your prayers."

On the other side there was a poem. This poem is entitled "A gift for Travis," by David - _____, a not too famous poet and philosopher, Christmas 1985." David had given this as a surprise Christmas gift, this poem, to his boy Travis.

When the Lord makes people it's an amazing deed
Because he makes us with more parts than we need.
Some of our parts don't even matter,
They just set inside us and make us fatter.
So if you need my kidney you can have it any time.
Because God put it in there; it's not really mine.
I suspect that he made one of mine for you
Since I'll do just fine without owning two.
The right one is Buck and the left one's named Clyde.
Which one you'll get, the doctors decide.
Since Clyde is sort of ornery you'll probably get him
And since he's all yours you can rename him Jim.
But whether you name him Jim, Fred, or Bo
I'll never regret it and want you to know
That I've seen many places and sailed across the sea
But there's nothing I'd rather do, nor place I'd rather be
Than having inside you, a part of me.

I said to David "That's one of the most beautiful things I've ever read. Can I share this with the church Sunday? I'm preaching on love. You've just done what my whole sermon is about. The priority of love. You've expressed in the model of your relationship with your son what God has done for us. God's seen many places. He made them all. He's not sailed the sea but he's sailed across the universe. But there's nothing I'd rather do or place I'd rather be, than having inside of you a part of me."

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God in Christ, Christ in you. The attitude that David had toward his son Travis is the attitude that God has toward us in giving us his Son Jesus and it is meant to be the attitude that we have in life toward all of life. Love for one another. A love that gives. A love that is a priority of life.

Father, we're people who are loved. Even if we set here today as adults and have never known what it is like to have had a loving family or good role model relationships there nevertheless abides this fact that since you are love we are loved. I pray for anyone here today who has come to this service without knowing your love. Or perhaps doubting your love, feeling that their own personal life is too unattractive, too filled with sin, too filled with mistakes to be loved. We're so grateful that your love for us is not dependent upon how we look or what we've done in our past. But your love comes to us on the basis of who you are. That you are the God of all compassion and the God who loves continually and loves the least, the last, the lost. Such are we and you love us. Let nothing in hell or in temptation or in the devil's approach to us destroy that union of trust that is created as a bond between you and us as a result of your love. There is no charge against us when we have placed our faith in you. You are not against us. You are for us. That which is of you is now living in us. The life of God lived out in our flesh. Let us take some of this love that you have given to us and help us with your strength to reach out to others. Each of us have people in our life Lord who it is relatively easy for us to love. Our feelings are good about them. In whatever way they are very attractive to us and it is simply natural and easy to love them. But there are also people in our life whom it is difficult for us to love. Maybe our love has not been returned or maybe it has been stepped upon. Or the love we have been seeking from another has been met instead with indifference and coldness and meanness and hurt. In those relationships where you are calling us to go on loving in spite of our feelings, in spite of the lack of attractiveness in the other person, in spite of the lack of response, in all those things help us by the strength of your Holy Spirit to go on loving, to believe all things, to hope all things, to endure all things. Let us enter in to a small part of what it meant to have the experience of the cross to go on loving even when there are nails in our flesh. Help us, Lord, to be complete in your love. Forgive us our own washing hands of other people when we become frustrated or tired out with their misbehavior or lack of response. Help us Lord, to be men and women of love. Loving you, loving our parents or spouse or children or family. Loving our friends. Loving the body of Christ. Loving the world. Help us as a church family to be known above all things for this one thing, that all men will know that we are your desires because we have love for one another. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we ask these things. Amen.