

Love (1 Corinthians 13)

by Anton Bosch

This sermon delves into the profound topic of love as outlined in 1 Corinthians 13 and 1 John 4. It emphasizes that without love, all other spiritual gifts and actions are meaningless, highlighting the importance of genuine, selfless love as the core of Christian faith. The speaker challenges the misconception that love is about receiving affection rather than giving it, stressing that true love is an outward expression towards others, reflecting God's unconditional love for humanity.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1, 1 John 4:7, 1 John 4:16, 1 John 4:20

Topics: "The Essence of Love", "Selfless Giving"

Description

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Transcript

1 Corinthians chapter 13, 1 Corinthians chapter 13, and having announced that chapter you can figure out what the subject is. So let's read verses 1 through 13, let's read the whole of the chapter, 1 Corinthians chapter 13. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I have become a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burnt, but have not love, it profits me nothing. Love suffers long and is kind.

Love does not envy. Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up, does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil, does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

But whether there are prophecies, they will fail. Whether there are tongues, they will cease. Whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child.

But when I became a man, I put away childish things. But now we see in the mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

And now abide faith, hope, and love. These three, but the greatest of these is love. So when we speak about love, it's a very, very difficult subject to speak on.

You'd think that this is an easy thing to speak about. It's not that easy. The problem with speaking about love is because we have so many misconceptions about what true love is, what godly love is, what biblical love is.

The other problem is that invariably when people speak about love and people want to quote these various verses on love, it's in an effort to get people to love them. Now here's one of the problems with love, is that it's not about people loving you, it's about you loving others. God commends his love towards us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us.

God loved us first. And so love, true love, is an outgoing thing, it's not an incoming thing. And of course that's exactly the problem we have, is because in our self-centered world, everything needs to revolve around us.

People need to love us. But in fact the scripture doesn't—there's not a single verse that says that people need to love you. And yet the Bible is full of verses that says you need to love others.

You need to love the Lord. And so we want to have a look at these things this morning, and obviously it's a huge subject that's the other challenge, because there is so much to say in so little time. And so I'm going to just pick some verses from 1 Corinthians 13, and I'm going to pick some verses from 1 John chapter 4. So he begins by saying, basically, that without love we are nothing.

Without love we have nothing. We can have all of the gifts, though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And so whether you can speak in tongues, and even if you can speak in angels' languages, whatever that means, if you don't have love, it's just noise.

And unfortunately much of the church in general today is just filled with noise. People who just speak, and yet there is no substance to it. There is no love behind it.

There is no love being expressed. And then he says, though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge. Now you'll see that this is 1 Corinthians 13.

In chapter 12 he mentions the gifts of the Spirit, and these are some of the gifts of the Spirit. Tongues, prophecy, knowledge, and wisdom, and faith. And so you can have all of the gifts of the Spirit, he is saying.

But if you don't have love, you are nothing. You can have as much faith and remove mountains, but if you have not love, I am nothing. I am absolutely nothing.

So it's easy for us to emphasize knowing things, knowing the Bible, knowing theology, having spiritual gifts. All of these things become important to us. And yet Paul is saying, and remember this is Paul speaking, this is not John.

We expect John to say these kinds of things. Paul we see as a hardliner, as someone who lays down the law. And yet this is Paul who is the defender of the faith, the one who would stand against every kind of error, and every kind of sin, and of disobedience.

And remember he's writing to the Corinthians who had all sorts of nonsense going on. And yet he says that without love we are absolutely nothing. Then in verse 3, though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burnt, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

The ultimate sacrifice to die for, I presume someone else, he's not really speaking, I don't think about dying for the faith, although that may come into it. But giving your body to be burnt at the stake, as many martyrs have, but if that is not motivated, if that is not driven by love, it is nothing. It is worthless.

In other words, and notice he says, it profits me nothing. In other words, when I stand before the Lord on the day of judgment, and I say, well Lord, this is what I did. I gave everything.

I had my body was burnt at the stake. I gave my life. And he says, you didn't love.

It's worthless. It doesn't count. It is dead works.

Now he's going to give us some qualifications or some attributes of love. And there are 15, and I'm not going to, we could probably speak on each one of those for 40 minutes. We're just going to skim through them.

But there are 15 attributes. Five of them are positive, sorry seven of them are positive, and eight of them are negative. So seven times he says love is, eight times he says love is not.

So love suffers long or is patient and is kind. Love does not envy. Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up.

And so you can see that he's speaking about the fact that love is not about myself. Why do I not have patience? Because I don't love. Because it's about me and my time and my patience and my endurance.

Why are we not kind? And folks, here's the problem, that when we look through this list, Christians are some of the most unkind people that you can get. You say, well that's a terrible statement, but that is the truth. I don't want to get into that in more detail.

And yet we say that we are Christians. But without kindness there is no love. Love does not envy.

Why do we envy? Because it's about me. Why do we parade ourselves? Because it's about me. Why are we puffed up and proud? It's about me.

And so it's about self-centeredness. And you can see the problem. We can see how that Paul is defining love as something which focuses on others rather than on me, my rights, my achievements, my whatever.

It does not behave rudely. We've spoken before about people who don't bother to greet others. That's rude.

People who don't say thank you. That's rude. Why are we rude? Because it's all about me.

Why should I bother to thank the waitress in the restaurant when she brings me my food or when she does something? She gets paid for that. No, that's rude. We say, well, you know, those are old-fashioned things.

And as I've been told many, many times here is that that's your culture. That's not our culture. Folks, this is not about South African or British or American culture.

This is about biblical Christianity. And Christians do not behave rudely. Christians do not behave rudely.

They do not seek or love does not seek its own. It's not about me. It's about others.

And again, we have to look at Jesus as the prime example of love. And as Jesus goes to the cross, it's not about him. And remember that he didn't have to go to the cross.

He was perfectly fine, to say that respectfully, in heaven. The angels were worshipping him. He was the almighty God.

He had all power, all control. Everything was at his disposal. There was no need for him to die at the cross.

And yet he dies because of us. Not because of him. Not because of even anything that he could get out of it.

But because he loved us. And so does not seek its own. Is not provoked.

Thinks no evil. So you can see all the negative ones. Does not rejoice in iniquity.

Now he's changing again to the positive, but rejoices in the truth. Let me move on because we can spend a lot of time on these things. That bears all things.

Love bears all things. Believes all things. Now this doesn't mean believes heresy or error.

He's talking about personal relationships. And he's really saying, believes the best of others. We're so inclined to believe the worst of others.

Just a little hint or a little bit of gossip. Oh yeah, yeah, that confirms that he's a bad guy. No, believes positive things about others.

Hopes all things. Endures all things. And we really need to spend time in this list and I would encourage you to go through that list and look at yourself and your relationship with others and say, does this define my relationship with others? Do I bear all things? Do I believe all things? Do I hope all things? Do I endure all things? And remember when he's speaking about enduring all things, we don't have to endure good stuff, easy stuff.

It's the hard and the bad stuff we have to endure. It's the insults and the attacks that we have to endure. And then he comes to the bottom and I'm sorry that I'm not doing a good job of dealing with 1 Corinthians 13, but I want to get to John.

But he says in verse 8, love never fails. But where there are prophecies they will fail. Whether there are tongues they will cease.

Whether there is knowledge it will vanish away. In other words, all of the things that we tend to hold precious, knowledge, gifts, understanding, these things are temporary. They will fade away.

Now, obviously he's not meaning, let's just take knowledge for example, that when we get to heaven there's going to be no knowledge. But the emphasis on knowledge is going to be gone because we'll know all things, it says, even as we are known. And so these things will vanish away.

They are temporary. But the thing that endures is love. Now abide, faith, hope and love, these three.

But the greatest of these is love. Now, I think that if one had to ask a question in a survey and without any reference to 1 Corinthians 13 and say, well, what is the most important thing about being a Christian? I think that probably 90% of people will say faith. Because everything begins with faith.

Without faith it's impossible to please God. Everything begins with believing the gospel. We are saved by faith.

And so faith to us is the most important thing about our faith. And yet he says that love is greater than faith. Now, remember he's not saying that we don't need faith and hope.

Of course we need those things. But in terms of what is more important, what am I going to chase after? Am I going to strive to have more faith or am I going to strive to have more love? Am I going to chase after hope or am I going to chase after love? And I think that it's very easy for us to chase after other things which are good things. Knowing the scriptures, doing the will of God, making whatever sacrifices we need.

It's good to do those things. And yet in the process there is something far more important. I have to remind you, as I've reminded you many times in the past of the church of Ephesus in Revelation chapter 2. This was a great church.

They had 11 good things going for them. They had been working hard for the Lord. They were discerning.

They were able to discern the difference between true apostles and false apostles. And the list goes on. Eleven things that they were commended on.

And yet he says that they are about to lose their franchise as a church. I'm about to remove your lampstand. And today there is no church in Ephesus.

There is no city of Ephesus anymore. The city continued or the church continued until AD 400. And in AD 400 it was in Ephesus that the church declared Mary to be the mother of God.

After that the church disappears. But there was one problem. And you know the problem with that church.

They had left their first love. They loved God. They loved the Word.

They loved the preaching. They loved discerning. They loved doing church.

They loved all of these things. But there was no love for the Lord. And so is it possible that I can do all the right things and not love the Lord? Yes, it's very possible.

Is it possible that I can do all the right things and not love my brother? Yes, it is indeed very, very possible. And so the greatest thing is love that we need to strive after. Now if we go to John, in 1 John chapter 4, and again I'm just going to speak some selected verses.

But he says, Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God. And everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Now I want you to pay attention to what he says in the last two lines.

Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. In other words, he is saying that love is an attribute of someone who is born again. If we do not love, and he's going to say that in exactly those words in a moment, if we do not love, we are not born again.

Now that's a shock. Now let's go back to Corinthians. If we are rude, we don't love.

If we don't love, we're not saved. Folks, just think about that. This is absolutely serious.

And you say, no, no, no, you're taking something out of context. No, I'm not. Here's the context.

So let me, before I give you the context. So everyone who loves is born of God, is born again. And he knows God.

Remember, knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

If we do not love, we do not know God. If we do not know God, we are not saved. We are not born again.

Folks, this is where the rubber meets the road. This is the reality. Now again, let me remind you of 1 Corinthians 13.

Look at that list. Do I comply with those 15 things? The 8 negative ones, the 7 positive ones. If not, there's a question as to whether I'm saved.

Now I know that's shocking. But folks, we must ask these questions. Remember, it was to the Corinthians that Paul says, and we'll hear that again this morning, as we come to communion, that every man examine himself.

And then at the end of the chapter he uses those words, at the end of 1 Corinthians he uses those words again, and he says, examine yourselves whether you be in the face. So the same way as I've told you before, every time I fly, I check my ticket a hundred times to make sure I have the right ticket going to the right place. And I have my passport and I have everything I need to be able to be on the plane.

Even the last thing I do when I go through the last check to board the plane, I check the board. Does this plane go to LAX? And yet we live our lives assuming that we're saved when in fact we're possibly not saved. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Now again, we say, but I've got the right doctrine. I know the Bible. I go to church.

I do all these things. Remember what Paul said, you can do all these things if there's no love, it's a waste of time. And here John is much more explicit.

Now again, I want us to understand the man who's writing. He's writing obviously by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But we look at John and we see him as being maybe a little soft.

Paul is a real macho man. He endured floggings and he endured shipwrecks and he did all of these things and he stood, you know, unperturbed before Caesar and preached the gospel to Caesar just before he was executed. And yet we look at John and we see, well, maybe John's a little, you know, maybe John is maybe not quite the man's man.

And yet this is the apostle of love that is saying, if you do not love, you do not know God. And then he says, and this is important, for God is love. I want to speak next week about truth and you'll see the same idea.

God, he doesn't say God loves. We know God loves. But notice what he says.

God is love. That's who God is. It's not what he does.

What he does is a result of who he is. And as Christians, we love because of who we are, not something that we learn to do. Unbelievers learn to love.

They love sometimes, occasionally, altruistically. What I mean by that is without expecting something in return. There are benefactors in the world who give away millions and millions.

But generally, we love in order to get something in return. But God is love. He has no motive.

He doesn't love because he has to. He doesn't love because he knows these are things he has to do. That is his very nature.

Now, I want you to remember that because I'm going to come back to that in a moment. Then in verse 16, and we have known and believed the love that God has for us. How did we know the love of God? John says because he proved his love, he commended his love to us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Now he says this again. God is love. Same words that he used in verse 8. God is love.

And he who abides in love abides in God and God in him. Now remember, it was also John in his gospel that says that if we abide in him and he abides in us, we will produce much fruit. Paul tells us what that fruit is.

The first of the fruit of the spirit is love. And so, being in God, not just having met him at some point, having prayed the sinner's prayer, whatever it is, but he who abides in love, who remains in love, not who... You see, we're pretty good, we're pretty good at affectation. We're pretty good at putting on a smile, acting kindly for a moment.

But that may not be who we really are. That may not be the real reality because it's easy to put on a show. We live in Hollywood and we see actors feigning all sorts of emotions on screen.

It doesn't mean that they really feel any of the stuff that they're showing, but they learn how to put on the act. But he who abides in love, remains in love, in spite of the opposition, in spite of the rudeness of others, in spite of the constant difficulties and challenges, abides in love. He who abides in love abides in God and God in him.

Now, look again. What does it mean to abide in God and for God to abide in me? Well, simply, it means I'm saved. How am I saved? Because I'm in Christ.

But how do I stay in Christ if I don't stay in love? How can I stay in God if I'm not loving? Can you see the connection between these two things? Now we get to verse 17. Love has been perfected, completed, among us in this, that we may have boldness on the day of judgment. Now, don't worry too much about the first part of the verse because I want to focus on the middle part.

Love has been perfected among us in this, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment. So the first reason we love is because we are love. We're going to come back to that.

But the second reason John is now saying is that I love that I might have boldness on the day of judgment. And what does that mean in plain English? It means that God's going to call me to an account for how I loved and whether I loved or didn't. And obviously he's saying if I've been, love has been perfected, if I've been completed in love, then when I stand before the Lord I will have boldness.

And obviously the flip side of that is that if I haven't loved I will be ashamed and I will have reason to fear him when I stand before him on the day of judgment. Now I want you to pay attention to the last part of the verse because as he is so are we in this world. As he is, how is he? He is love.

He's just told us twice in verse 8 and verse 16, God is love. So as he is, God is love, so are we in this world. So in the same way as God is love, we must be love.

Not we must love, we must be love. And you see that's where the problem comes because I can put on all sorts of airs and graces, I can put on a fake kind of love, but it doesn't mean that it's real. But he's now saying, I need to be like God.

I need to be love the same way as God is love. Now you can see that this is something which is humanly impossible. It is humanly impossible to love as God loves, who loved without expecting anything in return.

And even when we turned against him, and we read from the Psalms this morning about Israel, as Israel turns against God and is disobedient, God still loves them, and he still pleads with them, century after century. Even to this day, as Israel as a nation has rejected the Messiah, God is still loving Israel, and he will come back to them and he will plead with them to be born again and to accept the Messiah again. God's love is unconditional in that sense.

Obviously when I say it's unconditional it doesn't mean that God is going to love and there's going to be no consequences. That's the other problem we have when we speak about love, is we assume it simply means that God loves us and it doesn't matter what I do, God's still going to continue to love me. Yes he may continue to love me, but there are consequences to my disobedience.

That's the problem. You see when we deal with our children, we have to discipline them. When we discipline them, it's a form of love.

We don't discipline them out of frustration or anger, but we discipline them because we love them. God is love. He's expecting us to be like him.

So as he is, so are we in this world. What a challenge. Now as I said a moment ago, this is impossible from a human point of view, because humanly we are selfish.

Our love expects something in return, but God's love does not expect a return. We hope for a return. Remember one of the attributes of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is that it hopes all things.

So we hope that someone will respond to our love, but it can only flow from a transformed life. It can only flow from someone who has truly been born again. And this is one of the problems we have in modern Christianity.

We say, well, you know, there's no love. This has become a national crisis in the nation. The hatred that we see and the animosity and the desire just to kill everybody who doesn't agree with me.

And in fact this is part of the church's agenda these days. That is not God. That is not true love.

But that is natural, and that's a sign of people being unregenerate, not being born again. Look, I can preach on this for as long as I like. It's not going to change who you are.

You can maybe learn to be more tolerant. You can learn to be more kind. You can learn to be more loving.

But when something goes wrong, the true nature comes out. I've said it before. We say, well, that's out of character for them.

When someone acts up, when someone reacts in a bad way, we say, no, that's out of character. No, that is the true character that is coming out. Everything else is an act.

Everything else is hypocrisy. We're going to come back to that word next week. Everything else is a facade.

But when the rubber meets the road, the true nature comes out. In the old days we used to use pens with ink, and some of the older folk will remember, Roger will remember those days. And everything is fine until you knock the inkpot over, and then you have a real mess everywhere.

And then you discover what's inside of that pot. You can have a beautiful alabaster pot, and it looks beautiful, glass, whatever it is. But when it's knocked over, you find out what's inside.

Only if we are born again, truly born again, can the nature of Christ come out. Can we be like Jesus on the cross? Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing. Last verse, verse 20.

If someone says, sorry, the second to last verse, if someone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar. Now, no, immediately our response is we say, well, I don't hate anybody. No, if you don't love, you hate.

If you are a non-ambivalent, if you're non-committed, if you're neutral, then it's not love. And remember the Scriptures are about black and white. And so if you say, I love God, and you hate your brother, he is a liar.

For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? It's pretty simple. And then the last verse, 21. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God must love his brother also.

It's a commandment. Remember we speak about the fact that the Old Testament is commandments and the New Testament is all about grace. No, the New Testament has more commandments, three times more commandments as in the Old Testament.

And here John is saying, here is a commandment, and he who loves God must love his brother also. Look, this is not a thing we have discretion on. This is not a thing that we have a choice about.

If we are born again, we will love. If we are born again, we must love. It's not something that you can pick and choose on.

May God bring us to a place where we again be confronted with his love, because it's only when we see his love, how he loved us, that we can understand true love. We can look at the movie screens and we can read novels and we can read love stories, but we will never have an understanding of love when it comes to what the world has to say on the subject. There's only one place you can learn true love, and that is in the face of Jesus Christ as he lays down his life for us at the cross of Calvary.

Father, we pray that you would help us. Lord, these are things that we so easily skip over and we say, well, it's not that important. And yet, Lord, this is the essence of the faith.

By this we all may know that you are my disciples if you love one another. And so, Lord, I pray that you would help us to examine our hearts. And Lord, if we're not like you, Lord, help us to become like you.

Lord, if maybe we are still not regenerate, we're still unsaved, we're still not changed by the power of the gospel, I pray, Lord, that we may be changed. And Lord, that we may be different to the world and different to the way that we used to be. Lord, that we may love the way that you love.

Lord, these are simple things and yet at the same time, they are difficult to grab hold of and they are difficult to apply. And so, Lord, I pray that you would help us to, as we even come to the table again this morning, as we are confronted with your immeasurable love that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. Lord, that as we are confronted by your great love, we may examine the way that we act towards one another, the way that we act towards the world, the way that we act towards you.

Lord, because so many times we say, well, you know, I love God but I have difficulty getting on with my brother. But Lord, in the process we don't love you because we don't keep your commandments. And so, Lord, I pray that you would help us to understand, help us to be doers of your word.

I pray, Lord, for those who leave us now that you go with them, keep them, protect them, bless them. Lord, I pray as the rest come to your table this morning that, once again, your great love may be overwhelming, may grab hold of our hearts and persuade us, compel us to be like you because you are love. I ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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