

Nothing Less Than Love
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Have you ever played Skipbo? It's a card game in which there is a lot going on, as you play cards here and there. However, with all that's going on, there is only one way to win, and that is to empty your hand. What I have seen over and over again is that players get so distracted by all the things you can do that they forget the objective of the game.

The same is true of Christians. That's why First Corinthians 13 is so important.

First Corinthians 13 is one of the most beautiful and the most important chapters in the Bible. It is beautiful because it is poetry. Generally speaking, Paul was not a poetic writer. He was a preacher and a teacher. But every now and then Paul breaks out into poetry, usually for a few verses. But this entire chapter is poetry, and it is poetry of the highest order. It speaks to our hearts in a powerful way.

But even more important than its poetic power is the importance of the message. Paul reminds us of what it means to be true disciples of Christ. True Christians love.

We have to be reminded of the centrality of love because we are tempted to get sidetracked and to focus on lesser aspects of Christian living. Paul lists them.

Some Christians focus on gaining spiritual gifts, thinking that their goal as Christians should be to gain ever more spiritual power and authority. They want to be prophets, speaking the very words of God. They want to have faith that is so strong that they can move mountains. They forget how Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'" (Matt. 7:21-23) Jesus tells us that it is God's will that we love one another. So Paul tells us that the goal of Christian living is not to gain spiritual power, but to love.

Some Christians are focused on growing in their knowledge and understanding. They want to understand the mysteries and have all knowledge. They spend hours studying their Bibles. They read the writings of the scholars and the teachers of the church. They can have a learned discourse on the most obtuse ideas, and they can completely miss the mark.

One of the most brilliant men I have ever met was a seminary professor. He was chosen to make a presentation to us at our orientation on the first day of seminary. It was so brilliant that we had no idea what he was talking about. At the end of his presentation, he can us a chance to respond. Most of us just sat there in silence. We had no idea how to respond to him, because we had no idea what he had said. One fellow worked up the nerve to make a response. He said, "Professor, it seems to me that much of what you said was generalizing, and I was taught to never generalize." The professor made a face like he had just tasted something awful and said, "What is the status of an injunction which violates its own premise?" In other words, a rule to never generalize is a generalization in itself. He skewered the guy. This professor taught the classes on Christian theology. Everyone had to take his classes, but no one wanted to. The reason being that no one who took his classes got away without being thoroughly humiliated at

some point. Every exchange with him was a duel to the death, and you had a pocket knife, while he had a saber.

One day he asked the class if anyone knew what the underlying principle of all Christian morality and ethics was. Everyone sat there in silence. He glowered at them. When it became apparent that he was not moving on until someone answered, a couple of brave souls sacrificed themselves by offering answers, for which they paid dearly, as he explained with excruciating exactness why they were wrong. Finally, when no one else was willing to speak up, he looked at them with an expression of utter disgust and said, "It's love, blankity-blank, it's love." The whole class was instantly aware of the irony they had just witnessed. Here was a man who understood the concept of love and its centrality to Christian thinking and action, and yet had no idea how to be loving. He needed to step back from studying about Christianity and study Christian living.

Some Christians think that if they can just sacrifice enough and suffer enough for Christ, then they will be true Christians. We don't see as much of that in our society. We don't value sacrifice much at all. But there have been those who thought that if they gave up all their worldly possessions and withdrew from human society and spent all their time in prayer, eating only enough to survive, sleeping on hard, cold floors, surely God would be pleased with them. But God takes no pleasure in our suffering. God asks only that we love one another.

We should seek one thing and one thing only as Christians, to grow in love.

If you believe that you can express love more powerfully and effectively if you have spiritual gifts, or the ability to preach, or a greater understanding of the mysteries of the Bible and of life, or a stronger faith, or the ability to sacrifice, fine. Then seek these things. But don't forget that they are only means to an end. If you make them an end in themselves, you will have forgotten what it really means to be a Christian. Because being a Christian means to grow in love.

We need to be reminded of that. Many Christians are majoring on the minors and completely missing the point of what it means to be a Christian. Paul reminds us that we have been called by Christ to love.

Strangely enough, love isn't defined in First Corinthians 13 or anywhere else in the Bible. We are like the little boy who was called on by his teacher to define "trouble." The little boy thought and thought about how to define "trouble." Finally he said, "Teacher, I'm not sure how to define 'trouble,' but I sure know it when I see it."

Paul doesn't define love. But he tells us what it looks like, so that we'll know it when we see it. He tells us that love is patient and kind. Love doesn't have a big ego. People who love don't compare themselves to others, trying to prove that they are bigger, better and more important. They aren't trying to outdo others. They don't feel a need to be more popular, or more powerful, or more successful, or smarter, or richer than others, or more holy and righteous than others. They don't lift themselves up by pushing others down.

Loving people are so tuned to the people around them that they feel what they feel. They celebrate with people who are happy. They suffer with people who are hurting. So, they want people to be as happy as they can be.

Loving people enjoy celebrating the happiness of others so much that they are willing to do all they can to see that the people around them have the best life they can have.

They also do all they can to free people from the things that cause them to suffer. And that is often where it gets rough. Oftentimes the thing that causes people to suffer is other people. It is people who are more than happy to lift themselves up by pushing others down,

people who do think the way to a better life is to be more powerful, successful, richer, smarter and more righteous than others.

If you want to know what love is, all you have to do is look at Jesus. He is love personified. He came here for the sole purpose of loving us and calling us to be loving. He had the power and authority to perform mighty acts. He spoke the word of God. He did understand all mysteries and had all knowledge. He made the ultimate sacrifice. But he did it all out of love. He is our model for true Christian living.

Now, how do we grow in love? As a boy I didn't love people. They irritated me. I wanted to love people. I grew up listening to Methodist preachers telling me over and over again the importance of love. But I just didn't love.

It wasn't until I finally experience the grace and love of God that I was finally enabled to love. All love comes from God. We love because we have been loved. We are like an electric fan that's been unplugged. No matter how hard that fan tries to blow, nothing will happen until we are plugged into the source.

So, the first thing we must do to grow in love is to remain in God's love. Spend time daily in the presence of Christ, letting the love of God fill us. We love with the overflow of love which comes from God. Through prayer and study, let the Spirit of Christ remind you of how much God loves you.

Then remember that God loves the people around you as much as God loves you. And God wants you to share that love with them.

Christian love is the decision to spend ourselves lifting up others. It's not a feeling. It's a decision. Each person you meet each day is calling is time for decision. Will you spend yourself sharing God's love with this person by doing what you can to help him or her be a better, stronger, wiser, more mature person, or not? That's a decision you have to make anew every time. It doesn't matter if you loved people yesterday. Today is a new day. Today there are new opportunities to love. It's your decision.

It's easier to work on yourself than it is to love. It's easier to grow in faith and spiritual power and authority. It's easier to work on growing in knowledge and understanding. It's easier to sacrifice than it is to love. But we cannot take the easy way out. We are called to love.

Don't allow yourself to get distracted from the real point of Christian living. Decide the love the people God brings your way each day.

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