

1 Corinthians 13

The more I studied our 1 Corinthians 13 text, the more I saw it as bitter sweet. These are some of the sweetest, most beautiful, and poetic words ever written. Yet they are bitter, for they describe our sinful nature so very effectively.

Apparently love was lacking in the congregation at Corinth, for the Apostle Paul devotes an entire chapter to it. And my friends, love is lacking here also. But through the words of the apostle, God will build us up in love.

Without love there is nothing. Jonah had no love for the people of Nineveh. His preaching was still effective. They repented. But Jonah himself was a worthless man. Your growth in Christ does not depend upon my love for you. It depends on the work of God within you through the words proclaimed. But I gain nothing for myself if I preach and act without love. Like Jonah, I am utterly worthless. Your love for each other does not build this congregation. God builds it through the Gospel. But if you have no love for each other, you are tearing down what God is building.

The first part of our Corinthians text makes all this abundantly clear. That which is most central to our life together is the practice of Christian love. Faith is crucial. Yes, for faith alone saves. Hope is vital. Yet God is not faith, nor is He hope. But God is love. These are the only gifts that are eternal. All else will pass away except for faith, hope, and love. And these three cannot exist apart from each other. There is no faith or hope without love. But where there is Christian love, there faith and hope are genuine.

In the second part of our Corinthians text the apostle describes love; what it is and what it is not. And as beautiful as these words are, they are painful to hear, for they glaringly point out our lack of love.

“Love is patient and kind.” This is patience with people, not in circumstances. Love is not hasty and quick toward anger. It is patient with others. But speaking for myself, I lose my cool too easily. And this shows a lack of love, for love does not. It holds out for a long time before giving room to action.

“Love is not jealous and envious; it is not boastful or arrogant.” Again, speaking for myself, I fall way short in these. *“Love does not insist on its own way.”* And yet, because of my sinful pride, I do far too often. I put myself and what I want ahead of others.

“Love bears all things.” “It covers” is what this means. *Love covers a multitude of wrongs.* *“Love believes all things.”* It doesn’t jump to conclusions, but always gives others the benefit of the doubt. *“Love hopes all things.”* It simply refuses to yield to suspicion. But it always believes, in hope, that everything will turn out as it should. Love always looks with hope to the future. This does not mean that love is blind. It rebukes the erring brother when necessary. But as the truth is spoken in this way, love is the language it is spoken with.

This love...the love which the apostle speaks of, is not an ideal - how love should be in the perfect environment. He is speaking of love as it is to be in our daily lives within this sinful, broken world. But we don't love like this. Not just me, but you too. "*Love never fails,*" but we do. "*Love does not come to an end.*" It has no limits or boundaries. But we limit our love. We bind it up. We bring it to an end.

"*God is love,*" writes the Apostle John. What if that love, which God is, is the love we have? The love that is not so patient; that insists on its own way; that becomes irritable; that refuses to cover over the wrongs of others; the love that comes to an end and fails?

How awful if this was the love that God is! But it's not. God is perfect love. Sacrificial, giving love. He is love for the utterly unworthy. The love lavished upon people without any thought of whether they deserve it or not.

God's love is seen most clearly and most beautifully on the cross. You, for whom Christ died, are the object of God's love. God is patient toward you because He is love. He is kind toward you. He bears, He covers over your wrongs with the blood of Christ into which you are baptized. He endures all things for you. God never fails you, for love never fails, and He is love. You cannot out-sin His love for you. He never fails to forgive you.

Look at your baptism. This proves God's love for you. For in your baptism you see God's never-failing love. You are always immersed within it in your baptism.

If God is love - this perfect, beautiful, forgiving love, then it's clear that He is not hate; He is not anger; He is not punishment. He is none of these for He is love. It is natural for Him to love. It is unnatural for God to become angry and to punish. Yet He did. He became angry at Jesus and punished Him. Jesus did nothing to deserve this. We did. We refuse to love God above all things. We are the ones who do not love our neighbor as ourself. But in love for you, Jesus went to the cross. And as unnatural as it was for Him, God punished His Son in your place. It's because He is love. His love for you moved Him to do this.

"*Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*" Do you have faith? Do you have hope? If you do, it will show by your love. Only love can be seen. Faith and hope are unseen. God alone knows who has faith and hope. But Christian love is seen by all.

And love bears the most fruit. Faith deals only with God. Hope deals only with God. But love deals with God and with our neighbor. And thus the cross of Jesus is the perfect example of love. For the one beam points vertically toward God. The other beam points horizontally to others; to those in our family, in our church family, to those in our world.

Dear friends, I confess to you my lack of love. And I pray that you do as well. As we keep the cross before us - that love of God for us - our love will become more like Jesus' love. Isn't this what we want in our daily lives? In our congregation? It's what God wants for us. May He, through His love for us in Christ, build us up in love. Amen.