

THE MAIN THING



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1 Corinthians 1-13
Andy Burnham
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Vince Lombardi, the head coach of the Green Bay Packers football team in the 1960s, once said some strange and amazing words to his players at the beginning of a football season. Lombardi, looking at men who had played the game of football for many years, held up a football and simply said, "This is a football." It was a strange thing to say. And yet, amazingly, it had a huge impact. All of the players understood exactly what he meant. All of the players understood that sometimes you need to get back to basics. Sometimes you need to get back to the fundamentals before attempting to move forward.

Ray Stedman, a pastor at PBC for 40 years, made a similar point. Speaking to Christians, he simply said, "The main thing is to make sure that the main thing stays the main thing." The main thing for followers of Jesus is to make sure that we keep our eye on the football, so to speak, before attempting to do anything else. Sometimes it is important for us to get back to basics, to get back to the fundamentals, before trying to move forward.

What exactly is the main thing for Christians? What exactly is "the football"? What is the thing that is basic and fundamental to Christian life? The answer, of course, is love! Love is fundamental to our faith. Jesus declared that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). This is basic Christianity: love God, love your neighbor. If we lose track of love, we have lost track of the main thing.

This morning, I would like to talk about that main thing. I would like to talk about love. And, in order to do this, I would like to look at arguably the most powerful words ever written about love—the most powerful words ever written in either the Bible or in all of world literature. Namely, I would like to look at 1 Corinthians 13, which is often called "The Love Chapter." In this chapter, the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth—and ultimately to us as well—on this great and inspiring subject.

1 Corinthians 13 occurs in the middle of Paul's discussion about spiritual gifts, which extends from 1 Corinthians 12 through 14. Paul has been declaring that God—the God of love—has come to dwell within each person who has placed his or her faith in Jesus. Moreover, the God of love is seeking to make himself known in a unique way through each of his followers. He has gifted each of his followers in a unique way to make love known. As he told the Corinthians in chapter 12, someone is a hand, someone a foot, someone an eye, and someone an ear. We are each a unique member of the body of Christ, and collectively he makes himself known through us to reach out to a lost, broken, and hurting world to draw others to himself.

In Paul's discussion about spiritual gifts, he talks about love. He talks about why love is so important. He does this because the Corinthians had gotten off track, or were at least in need of a course correction. Yes, the Corinthians were exercising their spiritual gifts—they were saying and doing wonderful things. However, there was a problem. Surprising as it might seem, it is not enough to simply say and do the right things, important as those things are.

As we begin Chapter 13, the Love Chapter, I would like to use some concepts I learned from Ray Stedman. Ray used three key words when discussing this chapter. He used the words "preeminence", "practice", and "permanence." He talked about the preeminence of love, the practice of love, and the permanence of love.

The preeminence of love

The opening verses focus on the preeminence of love. They focus on the idea that love is more important than anything else—that love is the main thing. Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to

remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Again, Paul has been talking about spiritual gifts. He has been talking about the importance of saying and doing the things God had gifted the Corinthians to do. However, as I said, merely saying and doing what God had gifted us to do is not enough. Indeed, it is possible to say the greatest words that have ever been spoken and to do incredible things—giving all our money away or sacrificing our very lives—and still miss the mark. It is still possible for God to view our efforts as failing to accomplish what really needed to be accomplished, as failing to accomplish the main thing.

Not only do we need to say and do the right things, but we also need to say and do them with the right motive. We need to say and do them with the right motivation. Indeed, from God's perspective, if our motive is anything other than love—anything other than selfless, self-sacrificial, agape love—it is of no real worth in God's sight. As Paul puts it, we gain nothing.

If, for example, my words are motivated by anything other than love, it does not gain God's approval. If my words are fundamentally motivated by pride and a desire for people to praise me, I am missing the mark. In reality, if my fundamental motive is anything other than love, then my flesh is simply dressing up and masquerading as the Spirit. I'm a phony and a hypocrite, pretending to be one thing when I'm really something else entirely. The outside looks good, but the inside is not. As the old saying goes, it's like being a pig in a tuxedo or a pig with lipstick.

Again, by way of another example, it's like a person who, when the offering plate comes by on Sunday morning, holds a hundred-dollar bill at arm's length above the plate and lets the bill flutter down so everyone can see how much was given. Yes, the church will no doubt be able to make use of the money, but since the person was simply trying to gain the applause of people, it is nothing for which God will reward him. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people to be seen of them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 6:1).

I remember some years ago driving down El Camino Real in Palo Alto and picking up a hitchhiker. When I arrived at my destination—Stanford Mall—and was

about to drop the hitchhiker off, the hitchhiker asked me if I had any money I could give him. I looked in my wallet, and all I had was a five-dollar bill, which I gave to him. I gave him all the money I had. The man took the money, looked at it, and said, "Is that all you're going to give me?"

I didn't actually say anything to the man. Or maybe I said something like, "I'm afraid that's all the cash I have." However, the words that went through my mind were not exactly what one would expect from a loving Christian pastor. The words that went through my mind were something like, "If five dollars isn't enough for you, I'd be happy to take it back, and, if you'd like, I'd be happy to drive you back to where I picked you up and leave you there."

However, at that moment, a spiritual light went on. At that moment, I realized how misguided my motives had been. I didn't care about the man at all. I didn't love the man at all. I was simply hoping that he would praise me for my willingness to give him the last money I had. I didn't care about him. I was just trying to pay him to tell me how wonderful I was.

That is the kind of thing Paul is talking about here in these verses. He is talking about the preeminence of love. He is declaring that love is the main thing, the most important thing, the indispensable thing. If our motive is not love—if our motivation is not love—it is not what God is after.

From this, the question of course arises, how do we know what our motives really are? How is it possible to even know if our motivation is love or something else? By what yardstick can we measure and evaluate what is driving us and leading us to say what we say and do what we do?

The practice of love

Clearly these are difficult questions, especially since our motives may often be mixed. However, in the following verses, Paul moves from the preeminence of love to the practice of love. He describes some of the characteristics of love—some of the practices of love—and asks if these characteristics, these practices, are true of us. If they are, then we can have some assurance that our motive is love. If they are not, then we can have some assurance that our motive is something other than love. Paul declares:

1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

In reading this list—this list of actions or characteristics of love—some of the items are positive, and some are negative. Some describe what love is, and some describe what love is not. Some describe what love does do, and some describe what love does not do.

Someone has said that it can be helpful to read through these verses—to read through this list—inserting one's own name wherever the word love is either stated or implied and then ask, "Is this a true statement? Is this true of me?" So, in my case, I would read through these verses like this: "Andy is patient and kind; Andy does not envy or boast; Andy is not arrogant or rude. Andy does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but Andy rejoices with the truth. Andy bears all things, Andy hopes all things, Andy endures all things."

If each person would read these verses slowly and prayerfully, inserting his or her name, it might be very helpful in clarifying one's motives. It might be very helpful in giving us some indication of what areas in which we are doing well and areas in which we need to grow. In some sense, this exercise is like what David encourages God to do in Psalm 139, where he says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! / Try me and know my thoughts! / And see if there be any grievous way in me, / and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:23-24)

Someone once said that God is in the business of pulling weeds and planting flowers—pulling weeds and planting flowers in the proverbial garden of love in our lives. There are negative things God wants to remove—weeds he wants to pull—and there are positive things he wants to flourish—flowers he wants to plant. Indeed, this is the ongoing process the Spirit is doing in each of our lives.

Theologically, this is known as sanctification. Sanctification is the process whereby God transforms us to be more and more like Jesus in terms of our actual experience. In spirit, we are already new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is our core and true identity. However, we are new creations in old bodies.

We are new creations in bodies filled with a lifetime of thoughts, feelings, habits, attitudes, and ways of relating to people that may be very ungodly, very unloving. On top of that, our body has a faulty guidance system, known as a fallen nature, that sends us impulses attempting to pull us in a direction that is not pleasing to God and not at all Christ-like.

The old-time preachers used to talk about the penalty, the power, and the presence of sin. When we first placed our faith in Jesus, God delivered us from the penalty of sin. Right now, we are in the process of being delivered from the power of sin. Someday, we will be delivered from the presence of sin. We have been delivered from the penalty, we are being delivered from the power, and we will be delivered from the presence. These three concepts correspond to what theologians call justification, sanctification, and glorification. Justification has to do with deliverance from the penalty of sin, sanctification has to do with deliverance from the power of sin, and glorification has to do with deliverance from the presence of sin.

When we leave this world, either at death or the rapture, our deliverance from sin will be complete. When we leave this world, we will be free not only from the penalty of sin but from the power of sin and the presence of sin. Right now, however, we are in the sanctification process. We are in the process of being freed from the power of sin in whatever areas of our lives that power may be seeking to assert itself.

My concern for all of us who are followers of Jesus is that we would not merely settle for having been delivered from the penalty of sin—that we would not merely settle for placing our faith in Jesus, perhaps at an altar call. Yes, initially placing our faith in Jesus and being born again—becoming new creations in Christ—is absolutely critical. And yet, initially placing our faith in Jesus is only a first step in a whole new life of faith—a life that involves asking God to break the power of sin in our lives so that our actual experience would genuinely be more and more like that of Jesus.

The permanence of love

Paul now moves from the practice of love to the permanence of love. He moves to the idea that love will last forever, unlike many other things. He says:

1 Corinthians 13:8-13:

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for

knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

One of the great truths of the Bible is that history is going somewhere. History is not like the seasons of the year that simply go round and round. Indeed, ultimately, both history and nature had a beginning and will have an end. The present creation will one day be replaced by a new creation—a new glorious sin-free creation that will last forever.

As a result, everything can be divided into one of two categories. Everything can either be placed in the category of the temporal or the category of the eternal. Everything can either be placed in the category of things that will pass away or in the category of things that will last forever. Some things will be part of our present creation, and some things will be part of the future new creation.

Paul here urges us to stay focused on what is eternal—on what is permanent. He urges us to stay focused on what will last, on what will never end. Love, as he tells us in no uncertain terms, never ends.

As some of you know, I was a philosophy major in college. One of the branches of philosophy is logic—the study of clear well-reasoned thinking—and the simplest form of logical thinking—the simplest logical argument—is what is known as a syllogism. A syllogism has a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. If both the major and minor premises are true, then the conclusion is undeniably true as well. So, for example, if the major premise is 'God is love' and if the minor or second premise is 'God is eternal,' then the logical conclusion is inevitably also true: Love is eternal. Love is eternal because God is love and God is eternal.

Paul contrasts the permanence of love with the impermanence of other things. Among the things that are impermanent—the things that will not last—he names various gifts of the Spirit—prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. Yes, these gifts of the Spirit can be expressions of God's love. However, their particular

expression is only intended for a given season. Their particular means of expression will not continue into eternity.

To illustrate his point, Paul uses two examples. First, he uses the example of a child and an adult. He tells us that certain things are appropriate for a child, but they are not as appropriate for an adult. They are suited for one chapter of life but not as well suited for another. For example, when I was a child, I played on the floor with toy cars, dreaming of the day when I would finally be driving a car of my own. As an adult who now has a car of his own, most people would think it strange if I sat on the floor playing with toy cars and dreaming of having something I already have. This difference—this difference between what children do and what adults do—Paul likens to the difference between our current experience of love in this world and the direct encounter with we will one day have in eternity. The gifts of the Spirit are wonderful for this season of our existence, but they will give way to something better and fuller in eternity.

One of the great ironies of Christianity—one of the great paradoxes—is that we are waiting for someone who is already here. In one sense, we are waiting to encounter Jesus face-to-face. In another sense, he already dwells within us (Colossians 1:27). Jesus is here, but he is not fully here—or at least not as fully here as he someday will be when we actually meet him face-to-face.

This is where Paul's second example comes in. Namely, Paul says that what we are experiencing now—what we know of love now—is like the difference between the blurry image in an ancient polished metal mirror and a face-to-face encounter. What we see of Jesus now is like the blurry image in the mirror. When Jesus finally arrives, there will no longer be any need for the mirror. The mirror had a temporary purpose, but its purpose ceases when the real person appears. Our current sense of Jesus' presence has a temporary purpose, but that purpose will cease when he himself appears.

At one point in my life, before my wife and I were married, my wife, who is German, was completing her studies in Germany. We had met and fallen in love while she was on a year abroad program at UC Berkeley. After her program ended, she had to return to Germany to finish her degree. We wrote many letters back and forth. However, what also helped to sustain me during the long months apart were the photos I had of her—photos I often looked at.

Whenever she would come to California for a visit in between semesters, I would pick her up at the airport. It was, of course, always a tremendous joy meeting her in person when she would come through customs. The photos of her had sustained me while we were apart, but, when I greeted her at the airport, my attention was no longer on the photos. I did not continue looking at the photos and tell her I would meet her later at baggage claim. The photos, wonderful as they had been, were no longer necessary when she appeared in person. (By the way, we have now been married for 42 years!)

The particular expressions of love—expressions of love like those through the gifts of the Spirit—are incredibly important for a time. For a time, they are the Lord's way of being with us. And yet, the future holds something far more profound. The way the Lord will one day be with us in the new creation will be similar to the difference between a blurry image in a mirror and meeting someone in person. It will be similar to the difference between looking at a photo of someone and meeting them at the airport.

To emphasize the importance of love's permanence, Paul concludes by saying that three things will abide. Three things will last forever: faith, hope, and love. Of these three, the greatest is love. One might, of course, ask, why is that? Why is it that love is the greatest? Why is love greater than faith and hope?

The answer is, both faith and hope have something else as their object. Faith is faith in God, and hope is hope in God. Faith is faith in love, and hope is hope in love. Faith involves active trust. It involves actively trusting someone or something else. Hope, as someone defined it, is the expectation of good. It involves expecting good from someone or something else. In the end, faith and hope are only as good as the one in whom the faith and hope are placed.

For example, if faith and hope are placed in a defective parachute—if they are placed in a parachute that does not work—the faith and hope are of no value. You can have as much faith and hope as you want, but if you jump out of an airplane with a defective parachute, the outcome will not be good. Which is to say, faith and hope are only of value if they have been placed in someone or something that is trustworthy and reliable.

Love—the love of God and the God who is love—is infinitely trustworthy. Love is infinitely reliable. Love, so to speak, is not a defective parachute. Love can be counted on both in this world and the next. Consequently, love—and the God who is love—is greater than anything else.

My prayer is that God will use this passage—that God will use the words in 1 Corinthians 13—to get us back to basics. I pray that he will get us back to the main thing, especially if our focus has drifted away during the worst pandemic in recent history. May God use this passage to "get our eyes back on the ball"—back on the thing that matters more than anything else, back on selfless, self-sacrificial agape love. May we have a genuine awareness of the preeminence of love, the practice of love, and the permanence of love, and may this awareness fill our hearts and minds, motivating us in everything we say and do.