

1 Corinthians 13 – A More Excellent Way

Intro

- Last week we finished looking at a difficult but necessary passage (Matthew 23:13-39) where Jesus rebuked religious people who knew a lot about Scripture but were far from God.
 - o It was a sort of anti-checklist: you don't want any of those things to be true of you.
 - o The middle section of today's passage is a checklist of what *should* be true of us.
 - o Depending on how long you've been coming here, this sermon might sound a bit familiar.
 - It is the "revised & expanded" version of the very first sermon that I preached here at GSBC in 2018, and we looked at it again about 3 years ago.
 - It's also on a passage that I refer to fairly frequently.
 - And the reason that I may seem to harp on it is that what is contained in this passage is at the very heart of living as a follower of Jesus Christ.
- You can identify certain things about a person by their behavior.
 - o If they pull their car up behind you and turn on flashing red and blue lights, they're probably a police officer.
 - o If they knock on your door and try to sell you cookies, they're probably a Girl Scout.
 - o If they send you an email claiming to be the cousin of the first Nigerian astronaut who needs your help in transferring \$15 million, they're probably a scam artist.
- Jesus has told us that there is a certain behavior that will enable other people to identify us as his disciples.
 - o It isn't praying before meals, going to church, knowing what God's Word says, or holding outreach events (even though those things are good and important).
 - o John 13:34-35 – It is showing the same love for each other that Jesus has for us.
- But what does that look like, practically speaking?
 - o 1 Corinthians 13 gives us a chapter-long description of the necessity, practice, and eternal value of true, Christ-like love.
 - o You often encounter this passage at weddings, in Valentine's Day cards, or on similar romantic occasions. That's fine, but it has much broader applications.
 - In context, this was directed to people who were struggling to show love.
 - The church at Corinth was full of factions, unrepentant sin, and selfish ambition.
- In chapter 12, Paul has been reminding the Corinthian Christians they are the body of Christ.
 - o The local church is the visible, physical presence of Christ in its community...Griswold Street Baptist Church is Jesus to Port Huron.
 - o Each Christian is gifted to serve God in specific ways (like the different parts of your body working together), but the Corinthian Christians all wanted to serve in the most visible ways.
 - o Paul ends the chapter by telling them "...I will show you a still more excellent way."

(1-3) The Necessity of Love

- No matter what spectacular gifts we might have, what great ministry we might perform, or what dedication we might have to our faith, it is *nothing* without love.
 - o (1) Eloquent, even miraculous, speech is just so much noise without love.
 - o (2) A perfect understanding of the deep things of God even to the point of mountain-moving faith is pointless without love.
 - o (3) Generosity and a complete lack of interest in the things of this world, even to the point of martyrdom, mean nothing to God without love.
 - o A church can have...
 - The most biblically literate & involved membership
 - The most eloquent and passionate teachers & preachers
 - The soundest doctrinal statement & steadfast stand for truth
 - The most generous givers
 - o ...but without love they are wasting their time.
 - They are like the religious people Jesus rebukes in Matthew 23.
 - The kind of people that slam the doors of heaven in people's face and teach them to walk the road to hell that is paved with legalism & self-interest.
- The Christian life is all about love.
 - o It starts with God's love for us – John 3:16.
 - It is undeserved, self-sacrificing love that led God the Son to become a human being, suffer the punishment for our sins, and defeat death on our behalf.
 - This gift of forgiveness and eternal life is received by faith.
 - o That love must be reflected in us as we seek to follow the two greatest commandments that sum up all other commandments – Matthew 22:37-40.
 - o "Spiritual" things not motivated by love are ultimately done for self-centered reasons.
 - So that we can feel good about ourselves for doing our Christian duty and/or so that other people will admire us or accept us as spiritual.
 - This kind of service does not receive God's approval (Matthew 6:1)
- Ultimately, love means willingly putting another person's good ahead of our own...as described in the next four verses

(4-7) The Practice of Love

- This is one of those passages that maybe we have heard so many times that we don't stop and think about what each part of it really means and what it looks like to really put it into practice.
- Love is patient & kind.
 - o Patient – Able to bear annoying or difficult situations without lashing out
 - Our patience is often tried by the behavior of others, ranging from something that merely irritates us or someone deliberately wronging us.
 - Jesus is our example of patience under unjust suffering (1 Peter 2:21-23)
 - Rather than lashing out with insults or threats, he calmly trusted God the Father for the righteous final outcome.

- Kind – Friendly, generous, and considerate.
 - It is not enough to not retaliate against people who irritate us...true love also treats others well whether we feel that they deserve it or not (mercy).
 - Basically, it is treating others how we would want to be treated if we were in their shoes (Matthew 7:12).
- Love does not envy or boast & is not arrogant.
 - Envy – To be upset or discontent because someone else has something you want (and usually causes you to treat that person unkindly or speak about them slanderously).
 - It could be over possessions, looks, happiness, talent, popularity, a ministry position, etc.
 - It is a completely self-centered attitude that ultimately questions the goodness and will of God since God is the source of all good things (James 1:17).
 - Boast – To praise yourself.
 - This is the flipside of envy – you have something that others might value so you make sure to draw attention to it.
 - Often done via the “humblebrag” – “It was so embarrassing when the audience gave me a standing ovation” “so blessed to have this job with a 6-figure income.”
 - Again, it is foolish behavior. Since all good things come from God, why would we act as if the good things we have are demonstrations of our personal superiority (1 Corinthians 4:6b-7).
 - Boasting is one demonstration of arrogance – being puffed up with pride so that I think I’m better than others.
 - Such an attitude causes me to look down on them with contempt and speak of them in ways that lack mercy and compassion.
 - The opposite: “But for the grace of God there goes John Bradford.” – John Bradford (seeing a condemned prisoner led away to execution)
 - It is when we feel smugly secure in our own superiority or spirituality that we are mostly vulnerable to the enemy (Proverbs 16:18, 1 Corinthians 10:12).
- Love is not rude or self-seeking.
 - Rude – behaving in a way that is considered disgraceful or offensive
 - Being deliberately offensive is not a virtue (e.g. “trigger the libs” & “take that you PC little snowflake”).
 - Being rude shows that I care more about what I want to do/say than about what affect it might have on others.
 - Sometimes the content of God’s Word will offend, but our actions and speech need to be wise, gracious, gentle, and respectful rather than deliberately insulting and provocative (Colossians 4:5-6).
 - There are times when warnings against sin or against those who are leading others astray may need to be stated very bluntly for the sake of clarity...but even then the intent must be to warn the deceived, not to vent my anger.
 - Self-seeking – focusing on personal gain

- Like rudeness, it is all about making sure that the situation goes how I want –
 - That things get done according to *my* preferences
 - That I get public recognition for *my* contribution
 - That I get *my* share of the stuff being distributed
 - In love, we must focus on how our actions can benefit others, not how we can control the situation or gain from it (Philippians 2:3-4).
- Love is not irritable or resentful
 - Irritable – easily angered or annoyed / having a hot temper
 - Basically, this is the opposite of patience.
 - Being quick to fly off the handle easily leads to sinning against people in other ways in the heat of the moment (James 1:19-20).
 - In this age of online communication, be aware that “slow to speak” includes being slow to unleash your words or repost outrage on social media.
 - Resentful – keeping track of wrongs done against you
 - This is the more slow-burning anger
 - it is treasuring up your negative feelings against another person
 - it is a mental list of ways they’ve hurt you.
 - It can show itself as an inability to think or speak about them without a judgmental remark or putdown.
 - This is incredibly destructive in a relationship or a church as it slowly festers into hatred and division (eventually blows up over something stupid like table usage)
 - We must be willing to let go of our bitterness & malice (desire to see bad things happen to the other person) and forgive them the same way God, in his love, forgave us (Ephesians 4:31-32).
 - An unforgiving spirit is a serious offense against God who willingly forgives us at great personal cost. A person holding a grudge is living in unforgiven sin (Matthew 6:14-15 cf. Matthew 18).
- Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but in the truth.
 - Rejoicing in wrongdoing – taking satisfaction in someone’s sinful behavior.
 - Includes being proud of personal sinful behavior (lol...that’s just who I am).
 - Beware! God describes deliberate, knowing sin like this: Hebrews 10:29.
 - Love of God should inspire us to holy living, not blatant disrespect for his will.
 - Could also be in the sense of enjoying another person’s struggles with sin because it makes us feel better about ourselves or justified in hating them.
 - True love will gently come alongside a brother or sister and try to help them, but it will not turn them into the topic of gleeful gossip (1 Peter 4:8)...not even disguised as “a prayer request.”
 - Rejoicing in truth – excited for others to grow in their faith
 - The word used for *rejoicing* here has the idea of *rejoicing together*
 - When we come together it is to encourage and build one another up (Hebrews 10:24-25)...rejoicing in spiritual growth, not nitpicking at things that irritate us.

- Love bears, believes, hopes, & endures all things
 - Bears all things: doesn't make a big deal out of things that are annoying or irritating.
 - Not everything that irks me needs to be turned into a rebuke or confrontation.
 - A spirit of constant petty fault-finding will drive people away and desensitize us and them to occasions when hard truth does need to be spoken in love.
 - Believes and hopes all things: gives other people the benefit of the doubt, knowing that God is at work in those who are his children (the hope that what he starts, he finishes).
 - It is unloving in the extreme to immediately jump to the worst possible explanation of someone's actions or motives:
 - He said that just to insult me.
 - She skipped church so that she could go do less important fun things.
 - He didn't follow through on a commitment because he was lying and never had any intention of doing it.
 - She's in need of financial help because she's lazy & irresponsible.
 - He voted differently than me because he doesn't value God's Word.
 - She talks so much about compassion because she's soft on sin.
 - He only came to this country to do crime & mooch off the system.
 - If I am constantly assuming the worst about others, *I'm* probably the one who has a problem (with arrogance, bitterness, prejudice, etc.).
 - Love says, that if I feel the need to approach someone about possible sin in their life, I must do it gently and humbly, seeking to understand what is going on rather than rushing in with accusations (Proverbs 18:2, Hebrews 6:9).
 - Endures all things: perseveres despite difficulties (even if those difficulties are caused by the person we are trying to love).
 - Basically, love doesn't write people off or give up.
- If all that seems difficult and unfair, remember how God has loves us –
 - Jesus, the sinless Son of God died for our sins...that's not fair, but it's love.
 - God continues to love and forgive us even when we repeatedly fail...that's love.
 - Our love must reflect the eternal, selfless love of God

(8-13) The Eternal Value of Love

- (8-10) We must not value temporary things, even *good, God-given* things more highly than love.
 - For the Corinthians, they were obsessing over the temporary “sign gifts” of tongues, prophecy, and knowledge and treating each other unlovingly in the process
 - The same problem can easily creep into churches today as the tools for building up the body of Christ become the subject of anger, rudeness, self-seeking, arrogance, and all the other things that love is not.
 - Why didn't I get a say in what the new name of the kids' club would be?
 - The chairs got used for VBS without permission of the facilities deacon!
 - We sang all new songs this week, and it didn't feel worshipful to me!
 - We sang all classic hymns last week and I was bored!
 - Why does *she* get the solo in the Christmas cantata?
 - Why does *he* get to be the small group leader?

- We must behave like a mature Christian who knows that a day is coming when we will get to see Jesus face to face!
 - Don't ignore the main point (love) to fight over the tools...that's what 5-year-olds do (think kids squabbling over LEGO's)!
 - Right now, our limited minds and limited revelation is like seeing a reflection of Jesus in a polished brass mirror.
 - One day we will be in the visible, physical, in person presence of our Lord and Savior.
 - When he comes, we want to be able to stand before him in confidence because we have been abiding in him and reflecting his love to others (1 John 2:28).
 - (13) Love will be the defining characteristic of our glorious future and this side of heaven it produces within us faith/trust in our loving God and hope (an eager expectation of what is to come).

Conclusion

- Read this, inserting your name:
 - [Your name] is patient.
 - [Your name] is kind.
 - [Your name] does not envy.
 - [Your name] does not boast.
 - [Your name] is not arrogant
 - [Your name] is not rude.
 - [Your name] is not self-seeking.
 - [Your name] is not irritable.
 - [Your name] is not resentful (does not keep a record of wrongs).
 - [Your name] doesn't rejoice (take satisfaction) in sin.
 - [Your name] rejoices in the truth.
 - [Your name] bears, believes, hopes, & endures all things.
- If we're honest with ourselves that can be a humbling exercise as we realize areas where we fall short .
 - If you don't think you have any, you might want to start with arrogance.
 - Use this evaluation to focus in on areas where your love can be improved.
- Pray and ask God for his help
 - This kind of selfless love comes only through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.
 - Ask him to help you be mindful of opportunities and resist temptations.
- Come up with some practical steps to help you develop in that area and put it into practice
 - E.g. asking for forgiveness from the person you have been treating unlovingly.
 - E.g. if the issue is patience/irritability when you begin feeling exasperated commit to pausing long enough to pray silently for help in controlling your temper before you open your mouth, type on the keyboard, or click the mouse button.

- E.g. if the issue is envy, boastfulness, or arrogance find at least 3 things to thank God for at the end of each day (no repetition all week!) to remind yourself where all good things come from.
 - E.g. if the issue is being self-seeking, volunteer in a compassion ministry that is all about serving others who are in need (without trying to lead/change the ministry).
- If you're not good at coming up with concrete steps or holding yourself accountable, ask a mature brother or sister for help you with it (after all, Christ-like love is about helping one-another).