

## Introduction

I'd like to begin by having you fill in the blank. What the world needs now is \_\_\_\_\_sweet \_\_\_\_\_. The answer isn't "love sweet love," referring of course to Dionne Warwick's hit song. What is it then? Paul tells us in the passage I read – 1 Corinthians 13.

## Love Defined

1 Corinthians 13 is called *The Great Love Chapter*. It's called that because it's the Bible's classic statement on love. The word "love" itself is used nine times in these 13 verses. The New Testament was written in the Greek language. That language has four different words for "love."

The first is *eros*. *Eros* is desire. It's intensely desiring a person not just sexually but relationally as well. When I read some of the mushy cards I wrote to my wife when I was dating her, I realize it. I had *eros* when it came to her.

The second Greek word for "love" is *storge*. *Storge* is affection. A person has become familiar and thus dear to us. This person isn't our friend but we've grown fond of him or her. I have an affection for our church's mailman, for instance, Jerry. I've talked with him here and there over the years and have gotten to know him. He's a nice young man whom I like very much.

The third Greek word is *philia*. *Philia* is friendship. We have something in common with a person and that something draws us together. Anne of Green Gables talked about having a friend who was "a bosom friend, a really kindred spirit." That's *philia*.

Now, the New Testament doesn't use the words "eros" or "storge" at all. And it uses the word "philia" only once, in James 4:4, where most English Bibles translate it "friendship." That means that the "love" in chapter 13 isn't any of those – *eros, storge, or philia*.

What is it then? As most of you know, it's *agape*. Every time that you see the word "love" in your English New Testaments, the Greek word

that is translated that is "agape."

That fact would have taken most first century people by surprise. They almost never used the word "agape" because the first century world was so cold and brutal that they rarely, if ever, experienced it. But then Christians came along and began using it on a regular basis. They did so because the other three words really didn't describe the way they were loving and being loved. What they were experiencing wasn't *eros*, *storge*, or *philia*. It was something far different, far better, and they needed a new word to describe it. That word was "agape."

So that's the kind of love that Paul discusses in chapter 13 and that I'm preaching about. When I say "love" today, I mean agape.

### The Supremacy of Love

Now, the first thing that Paul does in discussing it is to declare its supremacy over literally everything else. Look at verses 1-3. Paul mentions six things in them that the Corinthian Christians and Christians today value the most: tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, philanthropy, and martyrdom. Those are impressive things and each is critical in its own way to the kingdom of God.

But notice Paul's radical assessment in verses 1-3. I can do all six of those things. I can speak in tongues, prophesy, receive revelations from God, exercise faith, give all my possessions to the poor, and yes, even die for Jesus. But if I don't love, listen to this, I am nothing, verse 2. And it profits me nothing, verse 3. Did you hear that? Without love, I am nothing and the best things I do profit me nothing. Those are extreme statements, the implication of which we absolutely must grasp.

Think about Billy Graham for a moment. He has probably preached to and reached more people for Jesus than anyone in history. Most Christians conclude, therefore, that he is great. A young man, for instance, once told me, "***Billy Graham will have one of the highest places in heaven.***" To which I replied, "***He may or may not have one of the highest places in heaven – depending on the love he has.***"

My point is this. Yes, Billy Graham has led millions of people to Jesus, which we believe is the greatest of all achievements. But if he doesn't have love, he is nothing and it profits him nothing. I personally believe that he does have love and that is what makes him great – not his preaching but his love. Mother Teresa said it well. Speaking to her Sisters of Charity, she declared: ***“At the moment of death, we will not be judged by the amount of work we have done but by the weight of the love that we have put into our work.”***

She's absolutely right. As Paul makes clear here, agape love is supreme. It's more important than any accomplishment, condition, or gift including, according to verse 13, faith and hope.

### **What Love Does**

Having told us in verses 1-3 that love is supreme, Paul goes on to explain why it is in verses 4-7. It's because of the things it does.

Paul mentions 15 of those here. Let's identify and define each one. #1 – It's patient: is not easily put out. #2 – It's kind: is sensitive to people's needs and acts to meet them. #3 – It's not jealous: is pleased when things go well for others. #4 – It doesn't brag: doesn't try to elevate itself in front of others. #5 – It's not arrogant: regards others more highly than it does itself. #6 – It doesn't act unbecomingly: is courteous, tactful, and polite. #7 – It doesn't seek its own: is willing to give up its rights for the sake of others. #8 – It isn't provoked: isn't easily irritated. #9 – It doesn't take into account a wrong suffered: is quick to forgive. #10 – It doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness: doesn't enjoy hearing about the failure of others. #11 – It rejoices with the truth: loves the sinner but hates the sin. #12 – It bears all things: is able to absorb insults and injuries without getting angry or depressed. #13 – It believes all things: assumes the best not the worst about people until it knows otherwise. #14 – It hopes all things: believes people are redeemable and that their persons and lives can be turned around. And #15 – It endures all things: puts up with everything imaginable.

Stop for a moment and imagine what life would be like with people who have that kind of love – who do those kinds of things. Would you like to be married to them, work with them, be friends with them, or go to church with them? Certainly you would! It's clear. Love is supreme!

So, love! That's what Jesus calls us to do in 1 Corinthians 13. Love everyone we know or meet in the way that verses 4-7 describe. That is our call and Paul tells us how to answer it. It's by doing two things.

### **Grow Up**

First, we must grow up. Look at verse 8. Paul mentions tongues, prophecy, and knowledge again. He then says in verses 8 and 10 that they'll cease when the perfect comes. *"When the perfect comes"* refers to the Second Coming of Jesus. Those gifts won't be needed in heaven and so will quit functioning when Jesus comes again.

But love, according to verse 8, never fails. That means that love never ceases. It keeps on going even in heaven. It becomes in fact the main business there. The main business of heaven is you and I loving God and others and being loved by them in return – forever.

So Christians, grow up, Paul says in verse 11. Don't be like children. Children are immature and care about insignificant things. Grow up and be like adults instead. Adults are mature and care about significant things. The children in this verse are Christians who care about and emphasize other things more than they do love.

We've all met Christians like that? I know I have. Like the one in Barberton who wouldn't fellowship with me because he speaks in tongues and I don't. He speaks in tongues but doesn't have love. Or the one in college who treated me rudely because he's a Calvinist and I'm not. His theology is in place but he doesn't have love. Or the one who's obsessed with spiritual gifts but constantly criticizes and condemns others. He's gifted but doesn't have love. Those Christians need to grow up.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that spiritual gifts, theology, ministry, worship experiences, and so on aren't important. I am saying

that they aren't as important as love is.

So Christians, don't be childish. Don't spend your life majoring in lesser things. Grow up and major in love instead. Value it more than you value anything else because you know it's supreme.

Valuing is the result of understanding. So understand love. Study everything that the Bible and the most familiar friends of Jesus write about it. After the Bible, I'd suggest that you start with C.S. Lewis' book *The Four Loves*. Prayerfully and devotedly seek to understand love. You'll eventually grow up and value it more than anything else if you do.

### **Pursue Love**

We answer the call to love by doing a second thing. According to 14:1, we must pursue it. The second thing is a natural result of the first. Once we grow up and realize the value of love, we'll eagerly pursue it.

To understand what it means to pursue love, we have to interpret verses 4-7 correctly. Paul isn't giving us commands here. He isn't commanding us to be patient, to be kind, not to be jealous, and so on. That's because those things aren't natural to our human dispositions and we can't do them. It's as simple as that. We can't do most of those 15 things. But love can and actually does. That's the correct interpretation of verses 4-7. Paul isn't telling us what we should do but what love naturally does. Those 15 things aren't commands. They're characteristics of love.

That means that we shouldn't pursue doing them because we can't. What we should do instead is pursue love. We'll eventually catch it and dwell in it if we do. We'll then find ourselves actually doing those 15 things because they're what love just naturally does.

But how do we pursue love? 1 John 4:16-21 tells us. That passage reveals the four movements of love. Those four movements are causally and sequentially connected. Each one flows naturally and inevitably from the one before it. They are as follows. #1 – God loves us and we experience His love for us. #2 – We love God because we experience His

love for us. #3 – We love others because we love God. And #4 – Others love us because we love others. You can see what happens here. Experiencing God's love awakens love in us. That is one of the most profound truths that we will ever learn. Experiencing God's love awakens love in us. Its implication is clear. We can never love the way Paul defines it in verses 4-7 without first of all experiencing God's love for us.

That means that we pursue love by pursuing God, specifically, by engaging His love for us with our whole being. We engage it that way by doing two things. First, we make and carry out the decision to be disciples of Jesus. Second, we then learn about and abide in God's love for us. I don't have time to explain in detail how to do that. But a good place to start is by studying the handout I've made available in the narthex. It's taken from *The First Aim* study and explains in some detail what you can do to experience God's love for you.

Those then are the two things we must do in order to have the love of 1 Corinthians 13. Grow up and pursue love.

## Conclusion

I close with a true story and the point it makes. An adult young man became a disciple of Jesus, pursued love, and caught it. One day, his crack addicted and neglectful mother asked, "***Son, why do you love me now?***" To which he replied, "***Before I became a Christian, mom, I didn't love you because I couldn't. But now through Jesus I can and do. Mom, I love you.***"

That simple story not only illustrates 1 Corinthians 13 but helps us fill in the blank I gave you at the beginning of the sermon as well. What the world needs now is \_\_\_\_\_ sweet \_\_\_\_\_! The answer isn't "eros sweet eros" or "storge sweet storge" or even "philia sweet philia." Those are the lesser kinds of love that the world and the secularists in it know and praise. The answer is instead "agape sweet agape." That's the kind of love that Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 13. It's also, beyond any shadow of a doubt, what the world needs now. So let's give it just that.