

This Week at the Creek

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

Love Lifted Me

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

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A lot of hospitals require a wheelchair for patients being discharged. However, while working as a student nurse, Patsy found one elderly gentleman already dressed and sitting on the bed with a suitcase at his feet – a man who insisted he didn't need a nurse's help to leave the hospital. But after a chat about rules being rules, he reluctantly let Patsy wheel him to the elevator. On the way down she asked if his wife was meeting him. "I don't know," he said. "She's still upstairs in the bathroom changing out of her hospital gown." Love never forgets!

But it seemed that some of the recipients of the apostle Paul's letter had forgotten what love is all about. It's almost humorous to think that a morally corrupt church in Corinth, where Christians were fighting over which of them had the best gifts of the Spirit, gave rise to these beautiful verses! For in chapter 12, Paul had chastised the Corinthians' lack of love in the way they'd put their spiritual gifts to use. Then came chapter 13 defining real love, and following that, chapter 14 showing how love works. He made clear that one gift is in no way superior to another, so now he urged them to discover how they could serve the church with the gifts God had given them.

The Lord gives us spiritual gifts in order to build up and serve and strengthen our fellow Christians. And that's why the apostle wanted to get across that love is more important than all the other spiritual gifts exercised in the church. Great faith, acts of dedication or sacrifice, miracle-working power – these have little effect without love. It's love and love alone that makes our actions and gifts useful, and we can see this in the Greek word for "love." *Agape* indicates a selfless concern for the welfare of others that's not brought about by any quality of loveableness in the person loved, but is the product of a will to love in obedience to God's command. It's like Christ's love manifested on the cross. And

so here Paul talked about the most excellent way to exercise all spiritual gifts: the way of love.

Of course, in morally deficient Corinth and its arrogant church, love had become a mixed-up term with little meaning. But have you noticed that today people are still confused about love? Most people can't tell the difference between love and lust. Unlike lust, God's kind of love is directed **outward** toward others, not **inward** toward ourselves. It's utterly unselfish. This kind of love goes against our natural inclinations. Indeed, it's impossible to have this love unless God helps us set aside our own natural desires so that we can love and not expect anything in return.

David Sanford thought about this chapter in terms of how so many modern churches operate and then paraphrased it for our culture – and in the way we live our lives – today: "If I talk a lot about God and the Bible and the church, but I fail to ask about your needs and then help you, I'm simply making a lot of empty religious noise. If I graduate from theological seminary and know all the answers to questions you'll never even think of asking, and if I have all the degrees to prove it, and if I say I believe in God with all my heart and soul and strength and claim to have incredible answers to my prayers to show it, but I fail to take the time to find out where you're at and what makes you laugh and why you cry, I'm nothing. If I sell an extra car and some of my books to raise money for some poor starving kids somewhere, and if I give my life for God's service and burn out after pouring everything I have into the work, but do it all without ever once thinking about the people, the real hurting people, and if I pour my life into the Kingdom but forget to make it **relevant** to those here on earth, my **energy** is wasted, and so is my life.

"Here is what love is like – genuine love, God's kind of love: It's patient. It can wait. It helps others even if they never find out who did it. Love doesn't look for greener pastures or dream of how things could be better if I just got rid of all my current commitments. Love doesn't boast. It doesn't try to build itself up to be something it isn't. Love doesn't act in a loose, immoral way. It doesn't seek to take, but it willingly gives. Love doesn't lose its cool. It doesn't turn on and off. Love doesn't think about how **bad** the other person is and certainly doesn't think of how it could **get back** at someone. Love is grieved deeply (as God is) over the evil in this world, but it rejoices over truth.

"Love comes and sits with you when you're feeling down and finds out what is wrong. It empathizes with you and believes in you. Love knows you'll come through just as God planned, and love sticks right beside you all the way. Love doesn't give up or quit or diminish or go home. Love keeps on keeping on even when everything goes wrong and the feelings leave and the other person doesn't seem as special anymore. Love succeeds a hundred percent of the time."

Love is the greatest of all human qualities primarily because it is the **major attribute** of God Himself. It involves unselfish service to others; to show it gives evidence that you care. Sure, faith is the foundation and content of God's

message; yes, hope is the attitude and focus; but love is the action! When faith and hope are in line, you are free to love completely because you understand how God loves. Or as Emil Brunner put it: "Faith has to do with the basis, the ground on which we stand. Hope is reaching out for something to come. Love is just being there and acting."

Nanette's day began on a sour note when she saw her six-year-old wrestling with a limb of her azalea bush. By the time she got outside, he'd broken it. "Can I take this to school today?" he asked. With a wave of her hand, Nanette sent him off. She turned her back so he wouldn't see the tears gathering in her eyes. She loved that azalea bush. She touched the broken limb as if to say, "I'm sorry." She wished she could have said that to her husband earlier, but she'd been angry. The washing machine had leaked on her brand-new linoleum. If only her husband had just taken the time to fix it the night before when she asked him instead of playing checkers with Jonathan. After mopping up the mess, she managed to lug the wet clothes to the laundromat and spent most of the day washing and drying and thinking how love had disappeared from her life.

After she finished hanging up the last of her husband's shirts, she looked at the clock. 2:30. She was late. Jonathan's class let out at 2:15. She dumped the clothes in the backseat and hurriedly drove to school. She was out of breath by the time she knocked on the teacher's door and peered through the glass. With one finger, the teacher motioned for her to wait. The teacher said something to Jonathan and handed him and two other children crayons and a sheet of paper. *What now?* she thought as the teacher rustled through the door and took her aside.

"I want to talk to you about Jonathan," the teacher said. Nanette prepared herself for the worst. "Did you know Jonathan brought flowers to school today?" the teacher asked. Nanette nodded, thinking about her favorite bush and trying to hide the hurt in her eyes. "Let me tell you about yesterday," the teacher insisted. "See that little girl?" Nanette nodded, watching a bright-eyed child laugh and point to a colorful picture taped to the wall. "Well, yesterday she was almost hysterical. Her mother and father are going through a nasty divorce. She told me she didn't want to live; she wished she could die. I watched that little girl bury her face in her hands and say loud enough for the class to hear, 'Nobody loves me.' I did all I could to console her, but it only seemed to make matters worse."

"I thought you wanted to talk to me about Jonathan," Nanette said.

"I do," the teacher said, touching the sleeve of Nanette's blouse. "Today your son walked straight over to that child. I watched him hand her some pretty pink flowers and whisper, 'I love you.'" Nanette felt her heart swell with pride. She smiled at the teacher. "Thank you," she said. "You've made my day."

Later that evening, Nanette began pulling weeds from around her lopsided azalea bush. As her mind wandered back to the love Jonathan had

shown the little girl, a Bible verse came to her: "Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love." While her son had put love into practice, she had only felt anger. Nanette heard the familiar squeak of her husband's brakes as he pulled into the drive. She too snapped a small limb bristling with hot pink azaleas off the bush. She felt the seed of love that God planted in her family beginning to bloom once again in her. Her husband's eyes widened in surprise as she handed him the flowers. "I love you," she said.

Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't force itself on others. Love puts up with anything. Love trusts God always. Love always looks for the best. Love never looks back, but keeps going to the end. Let us love one another. Let us live up to the motto that "Love grows here!" Let us open ourselves up to both receiving and reflecting the love of God. For by so doing, we'll ensure that love – indeed and always – grows here!

Let us pray: Lord, so great is Your love for us that it seems as though You could not live without us! So You created us; and then, when we turned away from You, You redeemed us. Yet, You are God, and so have no need of us. Your greatness is made no greater by our creation; Your power is made no stronger by our redemption. You have no duty to care for us, no debt to repay us. It is love, and love alone, that moves You. So may we too be moved by love – an undying love for You and love for each other. For we pray in Jesus' name.

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