

**Simple Love: 1 Corinthians 13**  
**March 20, 2022**  
**First Baptist Church. Lethbridge**  
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Two years ago, I stood up here and said that we were going to ask you all to do some strange things out of love and honor of one another. We were going to wear masks in the service. We were going to close off every other pew to socially distance, and we were not going to be shaking hands or singing out loud. Eventually, we were going to ask you to stare at a computer monitor watching our online services. All out of love. And as a church community, you responded with grace and love. It's been difficult, and tested the patience of a saint, but we rose to the challenges of the day. This family of God is amazing. I have been proud to tell others about this church, the people in it, and the way that we've handled disagreements, division, and difficulty.

And make no mistake, I have never lived through a more divided, polarized time. The smallest things divide our community! Now, two years later, I'm standing up here again, anticipating another pivotal moment in our history. And the question I am getting asked more often now is, how do we come back together?

Well, friends, once more the call is to love each other. We are called to love our neighbour, and our God. We will be gathering together more and more, and people will be choosing to wear masks or not, to shake hands or not, to do all of the thousand little things that annoy us, scare us, anger us. Our newsfeeds are full of protests and wars and inflation.

This is what makes our journey through 1 Corinthians so timely! Because this is the same kind of division and fighting that the church of Corinth was experiencing. They were broken. People fighting, and suing each other. Some of them flaunting their food in front of others who were going hungry. One guy is sleeping with his mother-in-law. YIKES! People were so focused on their own expressions of worship that others were being forgotten, hurt, or ignored. Their worship services were weird to the point of dysfunctionality.

And into this mix, Paul writes this chapter. As I sat down to write my thoughts out for this sermon, I wanted to begin by talking about how this passage on love forms the heart (see what I did there?) of Paul's corrections on the spiritual gifts – how the Corinthians thought that the best gifts were the flashy ones, like healing, prophecy, tongues and the like. But Paul says that the greatest spiritual gift is actually the daily grind of simple love. When we as God's people begin to focus too much on other things, whether it is spiritual warfare (that was the trend in the eighties!), or end times (that was the trend in the 90's), or debates like predestination or free will (that one simply won't seem to die!), and we forget that love is what we are called to do, our church services and Christian lives begin to look more and more like the world around us, and less and less like God's hand moving in the world!

Both regular church attenders and non-religious people often know this one. Second only to John 3:16, 1 Corinthians 13 is the most read according to the bible website biblehub.com It is a staple at weddings. And for good reason! Love is central in the bible. A while ago, I showed you a slide that had all of the references for love on it. It was impossible to read, because love is mentioned over 1000 times, again according to biblehub.com.

So, that's great. But love? How can I know what to do with that?

We live in a time where I really want to look at what certain words mean, because I'm pretty sure that we are thinking different things when we say certain words.

Words like:

Freedom.

Rights.

Justice.

Leadership

But maybe more than all of them, we need to clarify what we mean by love. After all, I love pizza, and my kids. I love reading, and my dog, and riding motorcycles, and warmth, and my wife, and God. . . well, you see the problem! In society at large, love is relegated to fuzzy feelings and Hallmark greeting cards.

But it gets worse! We read slogans like, "love is love". Or if you love me, you'll do xyz. Or I cannot love someone who disagrees with me on this issue!

I think that this is remarkably similar to what the church of Corinth was going through. Everyone knew the Royal Commands in the Torah. Remember what Jesus taught the teacher of the law that the greatest commands were?

Crowd participation:

Love the Lord your God.

Love your neighbour.

Love yourself.

But, the concern of the church was, HOW do I do Love for God and my neighbour? What about my freedom to eat what I want at the pot luck – also known as communion! What about my preference to speak in tongues in worship? Or what happens if I think differently than the person speaking right now?

Here comes Paul to the rescue, with what is maybe the most amazing love poem ever written. Tim Mackie, the co-founder of [thebibleproject.com](http://thebibleproject.com), makes the amazing observation that love according to Paul is more than a sentimental feeling, or an empty benediction. It is less a feeling that happens to you, but to a behavior that you do to other people. "Love is a settled purpose to behave and act a certain way." He substituted this kind of understanding for the word, and this is what happened:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Would it make sense to say instead, "But God demonstrated his good feelings about us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Or, the most famous verse of all: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him will be saved.

What if it said, God felt so great about the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him will be saved.

According to Mackie, and I agree with him, love in scripture is not so much a feeling as it is an action. It is the foundation for, and root of everything that God does, and it is the very expression or action that identifies the people of God.

Love is the unifying superpower that God has given to the church. In Romans 5:5, Paul says, "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Love is such a potent power that it threatened the Roman Empire. In a letter between leaders, Roman Emperor Julian complained to the priests of Rome in Galilee that the simple practices of Christian love seen in care for the poor, the burial of the dead, and the leading of sober lives was actively pulling people away from worship in Greek temples. During two epidemic outbreaks of disease, Christian acts of love contrasted to pagans so strongly that some think that this was what toppled paganism as the dominant religion of Rome.

That's all well and good for a history lesson. But it also shows us the way forward.

How are we to come together? It is by loving each other! Simple to say, difficult to do. It is so hard that this passage today is a lifetime endeavor. No one can master it. There is something in here that God wants us to work on. Far from being a fuzzy emotion or a cheesy Valentine's card, love is the rock-solid empowerment and presence of God through the church, God's response to a broken, hurting, and dying world.

This passage gets so caught up in debates about spiritual gifts and so moralized in social media or sermons, that we often fail to simply sit in the wondrous, amazing simplicity of this description of HOW do we love? Likewise, we sometimes get so caught up in the social dilemmas and arguments of our time that we forget that what makes a Christian stand out in society is not our beliefs, or our statements of faith, or our moral positions or politics, but rather our acts of simple, every day love. If we were to do life within Paul's description of love, then not only would we be unified as a church, but people would be compelled to come and experience it.

It is so good that I simply want to read it out slowly, carefully, and deliberately. I don't want to talk much more about it, actually, because I don't want to get in the way of what the Holy Spirit is trying to do in our midst today. As I read our scripture for today, I want us to listen closely, and keep our minds on familiar words, but with new attention. Listen for where the Holy Spirit whispers to your mind, This! This is what I want to do for you, with you, and through you! Pay attention here! How does your last week look when it is compared to Love? What do you need to repent of? Change? Celebrate?

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no account of wrongs. Love takes no pleasure in evil, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be restrained; where there is knowledge, it will be dismissed. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial passes away.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I set aside childish ways. Now we see but a dim reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love.”

Let’s pray.

Benediction:

A new command I give you: Love one another.