The Greatest of All Ambitions

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Recap: We are at the end of our series, The Greatest of These. We've talked about love as something that we receive, enjoy, and supply to the world around us. Love comes from God through Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, through the gospel, and then through us God supplies His love in such a way that He is the Giver, we are the recipients and conduits, and therefore, He gets the glory for it.

I've used the picture of a Watershed that receives water and then supplies that water onto other bodies of water. ***"We receive, we enjoy, and we supply the love of God in Christ unto the glory of God".*** That's the statement we have spent 10 sermons thinking about. This is how the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit is spread to the world! Can we just pause for a moment and say, "What a privilege that God has chosen each of us to be a part of His Mission to spread His love to the world!"

Context: This morning we come to the statement that inspires the title of this series – The Greatest of These. Paul in v.13 says, ***"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love***." Let's start with some context for the verses we just read, context is always key. This chapter is sandwiched in between two chapters (12 and 14) where Paul is seeking to correct the Corinthian church about the use of Spiritual gifts. Look at 1 Cor. 12:1 - **"*Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed*" (1 Cor. 12:1)**. So Paul is talking about love set within a greater conversation about spiritual gifts that are used in the church. Gifts, activities, services (12:4-6) that God distributes to each person in the church as He sees fit to distribute (12:7). If you are a follower of Jesus, and you don't know what your spiritual gift is, you should be praying about that. There is nothing more thrilling and life giving than for the Holy Spirit to work through you and for you to be a conduit of love within the church and the world.

The Church at Corinth was a messy church. And they were an ambitious church. They were wealthy, they were steeped in the Greco-Roman culture, which in many ways is like our world today – ambition, arrogance, pride, and strength were celebrated. These group of people got saved, but there were still vestiges of the Corinthian way that God had to root out like a bad cavity. There were problems with division in the church. There was immorality and idolatry that Paul had to correct. There was confusion about the resurrection of the dead. There was confusion and abuse regarding spiritual gifts. Paul is writing this letter to Corinth from Rome to correct them regarding these problems.

One of their errors, what that they were elevating certain gifts, activities, and services within the church above others. In chapter 12, Paul wrote that every member within the church was important and every gift, every activity within the church was necessary. In chapter 14 Paul shows that the teaching, proclamation gifts are more important that tongues because they have the ability to educate and serve others. But right in the middle he shows that love is the "more excellent way" than any of the gifts.

Paul doesn't devalue the importance of the spiritual gifts…

- ***"pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophecy". (1 Cor. 14:1)***

- ***"earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues." (1 Cor. 14:39)***
- ***"But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way." (1 Cor. 12:31)***

Love is the more excellent way…it is the greatest of all pursuits, the greatest of all ambitions…Love is like the glue that holds the gifts of the Spirit together – without the glue, the gifts fall apart – they are useless. One writer says this, "Love is the mortar between the building bricks of the church." Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the church, the apostles, prophets, teachers…and every member of the church are the bricks of the building…but love is the mortar that holds it all together.

Three things we see about love in this passage

1. Love is the Greatest of All Ambitions – 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

(Read passage)

Within the Corinthian culture there was a high value of knowledge, oration, and spiritual ecstatic experiences. Their pagan occult worship saw these manic and ecstatic experiences as proof of a higher level of spirituality. The stranger, the more uncontrollable, the more spiritual. It's easy to see then why the gift of tongues – a spiritual language between the believer and God – was highly valued.

Today, there are those who believe that speaking in tongues is a sign that someone is truly filled with the Holy Spirit. If you don't speak in tongues, you are not even a Christian! There are churches that you can go to today and you can tell the minute you walk in that they elevate the ecstatic experience of people as they speak out loud in tongues and make lots of noise and there is a huge flare to the ministry but unfortunately teaching and the communication of the gospel is pushed to the side and having an exciting emotional experience is elevated and seen as more spiritual even above the communication of the Word of God. Paul deals with this abuse in 1 Corinthians 14 and he argues that the Holy Spirit never overtakes someone where they have to act uncontrollably for God is not the author of confusion (14:32-33) and within the church all things should be done in a decent and orderly fashion so as to not distract or confuse people within the church (14:40).

Also, the Greco-Roman world highly valued knowledge and oration. Corinth was a highly learned and philosophical city. Corinth was a port city, so there would be philosophers and "sophists" who would come from all over the world. The "sophists" were vocational orators. They would travel from town to town and give eloquent speeches that were meant to entertain and keep the public informed about news from abroad. They were like our modern-day news network. So the Corinthians highly valued the gifts of "tongues, knowledge, and prophecy" – the experiential and the informative. In Chapter 1 Paul rebukes them because they were causing division by pinning teachers in the church against each other as greater – ***"each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."*** **(1 Cor. 1:12) I follow CNN! I follow NBC! I only listen to the FOX news network.**

In our culture, which is much like their culture, we get our understanding of the world from the news networks and even in many cases from the entertainment industry in Hollywood as if being an eloquent actor or speaker somehow makes you a greater harbinger of truth. Much like the Corinthians, we

worship entertainment and we are easily moved by powerful experiences and presentations. We need to be careful. One of the greatest, and most influential speakers ever was Adolf Hitler…he was able to convince the entire Nazi Party to do the most wicked and abominable things!

Now all these things Paul mentions are important…the gifts of the Spirit are important! Paul speaks of faith that can move mountains, even being willing to give your body over to death – You can speak beautifully, you can have great knowledge, you can give away everything you own, even your own life in martyrdom – but if you don't have love you are "a noisy gong", you are "nothing", and you "gain nothing".

These verses are very similar to the words of Ecclesiastes…where the preacher (Qoheleth) the son of David is criticizing ambition. He is speaking from his own experience of pursuing pleasure, ambition in knowledge and wisdom, ambition in work, ambition in accumulating wealth, slaves, houses, gardens…on and on…and at the end of it he says, "vanity of vanities" – it's like chasing after the wind! You go outside, and you run after the wind and just when you think you got it…it slips right through your fingers! That's how worldly ambition is…it slips right through your fingers…and ambition in the church can be that way also.

Paul is saying, you can speak in tongues, you can prophecy, you can understand all mysteries and possess all knowledge, you can move mountains with faith, you give away everything…even your own life. By the way, these are all things that Paul says that he himself does in the letter of Corinthians! BUT if I don't have love – it's vanity of vanities…it's a chasing after the wind.

Love is the greatest pursuit. Love is the Greatest of All Ambitions.

2. The Fruits of Love – 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

You've probably heard this very famous description of love at weddings, there is nothing wrong with that! In fact, it is useful in a wedding to show the bride and groom… "you are going to need this for the next 50 years!" However, Paul is not intending this passage to be an exhaustive list on ***what love is***. This passage is more about ***what love does*** – **this is a list of verbs** - **when facing Corinthian types of problems**. Division. Carnality. Idolatry. Confusion. Pride and arrogance. Selfish ambition. Paul says, the way forward is love. Now…this is why this description has great application for marriage and for all relationships – relationships can hit bumpy roads. People can hurt one another and the closer you are to the person who hurts you the more it hurts.

Most commentators think that Paul is sharing this description of love as the very heart of his letter. These descriptions – both positive and negative descriptions – correct all of the problems of Corinth. Right in the heat of his argument, Paul slows down and talks about the nature and fruits of love – the cadence of the letter is slowed down here. ***I can't think of a better way to end our series than for us to slow down and simply let this beautiful description wash over us and cleanse us from our errors and inspire us to love as God loves us. Can you put your name where the word love is? Jesus fits this description perfectly.***

Love is patient - to bear up under provocation without complaint, be patient, forbearing – When you are provoked to act in anger, to respond harshly, instead you bear under it prayerfully. Instead of

thinking of how you can react, you pray for wisdom: Where am I wrong? What is God teaching me through this?

Love is Kind – this word speaks of a loving, gentle, merciful demeanor. Kindness is often mistaken for weakness…but it's actually very powerful and influential. Kindness is like soft, slow snowfall…it is gentle, but it is constant…and overtime it overwhelms everything. This is how God brings us to repentance…His constant, gentle kindness in our lives leads us to repentance. Kindness doesn't just overlook wrongs, it responds actively to wrongdoing through the influence of gentle, mercy that over time overwhelms everything around it.

Love does not envy – the word is really "zeal". Zeal can be a very good thing or a very bad thing. This same word is used in 12:31 and 14:39 to speak of "desiring the gifts" of the Spirit! Paul told the Corinthians in 2 Cor. 11:2 that he had a "divine jealousy" (zeal) for them. But zeal for what others possess turns into a selfish jealousy or covetousness. The Jews were jealous (zeal) of Paul (Acts 17:5) and James tells us that quarrels and fights come from our covetous (zeal) desires that go unfulfilled (Jam. 4:2). This was no doubt happening in Corinth. They were even taking one another to court and suing one another! (1 Cor. 6).

Love does not boast - **to heap praise on oneself.** In the heat of conflict we can boast about our part and what we're doing right and how we are justified.

Love is not arrogant – it doesn't have an exaggerated view of self. It's not *puffed up or proud.* Paul told the Corinthians earlier that "knowledge puffs up but love builds up. They were very proud over what they thought they knew and it was causing abuse and division within the church.

Love is not rude – here Paul is thinking of behaving indecently. In 1 Cor. 5 Paul rebukes the Corinthians because one young man was actually having physical relations with his step mother…and Paul is shocked that not only are they allowing this, they were actually boasting in their freedom in Christ to act indecently. "Christ has saved me from sin, so I can behave immorally because I have freedom"…that was their mindset! Love is not rude, love acts decently and is morally upright. Sometimes our speech as Christians can just be off…have you ever had someone speaking to you and say something where you kind of "cringe"?

Love does not insist on its own way – this is easy to understand. It isn't selfish or self-seeking. Often times in an argument we really aren't thinking about what is best for the other person, but what is best for ourselves. The Corinthians were even prohibiting some from their gatherings because of lower social status. Some were gathering with them to get drunk…they were a selfish bunch! Love is willing to forsake certain comforts to not stumble others. Love is willing to go the extra mile with others who are difficult.

Love is not irritable – some people are very easily aroused or easily irritated by others. NIV – not easily angered. Love doesn't have a short fuse. Love isn't quickly provoked by others to anger.

Love is not resentful – This word is an accounting term. It's actually used of our justification in Christ. God accounts, accredits, calculates us to be righteous through Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:4; Gal. 3:6). The NASB – "love… does not take into account a wrong suffered". It doesn't "keep books on evil". Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive: **"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" [22] Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but**

seventy-seven times." – forgive indefinitely. (Mt. 18:21-22). Certainly, there is wisdom at keeping oneself clear from toxic people…but when people ask for forgiveness and are repentant we need to forgive and not keep a record of the wrong.

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing – the word is "unrighteousness". Again, the Corinthians were actually boasting in many cases of their own immorality because they saw themselves as free in Christ to do whatever they want!

Instead… **Love rejoices in the truth –** the word implies a "rejoicing together", "WITH rejoice". **love shares the joy with one another when truth is upheld.** Truth and unrighteousness are being compared and contrasted here because truth is suppressed where there is unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18)…but when truth is upheld and celebrated it reproves and corrects unrighteousness. Truth sets things right!

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things – the fact that Paul says "all things" shows that there are no limits to love. No matter what happens there is always a way to pursue love. One commentator says, "**'Love never tires of support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, never gives up.'" Paul's appeal to faith and hope is not because we should put our faith and hope in the individual, but in God living in the individual who is able to correct, convict, and restore the brother or sister in Christ. Remember, Paul is writing to believers. The NT often gives this perspective that we are to believe and hope for the best regarding Christians:**

- **"Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation." (Heb. 6:9).**
- **"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil. 1:6)**
- **"Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you." (Phil. 3:15)**

When we are faced with division and strife within the church or within marriage, we can trust that God is able to correct, convict, and restore. It's when we try to fix it ourselves that we often fall prey to some of the negative descriptions of what love is not here. If we can trust in God…it will enable us to love the way Paul describes love in this passage.

How are you doing with this list? We have to remember that we will never keep this list perfectly, but it serves as a reminder and inspiration and it can inform our prayers. Jesus fits this description perfectly in His life and in His death and in His current intercession on our behalf…we should meditate on His example as we seek to demonstrate the nature and fruits of love described here.

3. Love Transcends the Ages – 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

God has worked throughout history through different ages…I like to think of this like a snowball that starts out small and gathers and gets bigger and bigger. The snowball is God's Kingdom and as time goes on His Kingdom grows and takes different forms until one day God's eternal Kingdom Age will be established. In this current church age, while we await the Coming of Jesus when He will establish His eternal Kingdom, God is building His church. At this time, the gifts of the Spirit are essential, but there

will come an age where they are no longer needed – because the perfect will come. However, love transcends all the ages, love will always remain.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. (all these gifts are important now, but there is coming a time when they will no longer be needed) **9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.** (I take the "perfect" as referring to the Messiah and His Kingdom Age – when Jesus returns and rules and reigns forever. Some take the "perfect" to refer to the completion of the canon of Scripture…therefore, the gifts of the Spirit have "ceased". I just don't see that here and I have never heard a convincing argument to say the gifts have ceased. This is something I tap the pulpit on…not pound. Paul's point is that love transcends even the time that is coming when the gifts will no longer be needed!) **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.** (Not only is God's Kingdom growing age to age, but our knowledge and God's revelation is growing age to age. In this current age we are still very much like children, and we see things dimly…but one day face to face. When you see Jesus face to face – tongues are no longer needed. The gifts of knowledge and prophecy – no longer needed. A mirror in Paul's day was not like ours, it was made of finely polished brass and would provide an imperfect reflection at best. But love will remain…in fact love will just TRULY begin as there is no longer anything hindering us from a perfect, abiding, love relationship with our God that lasts forever and ever as we are "fully known" and we see Him "face to face".) **13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.** (not only is love greater because it transcends the gifts in this age…but love transcends faith and hope as well. Faith, hope, and love abide – they transcend this age – they abide even after the "perfect comes"…but out of those three – love is the GREATEST OF THESE. We have only begun to know the great and glorious love of God. We have received His love, and we have enjoyed His love, and we have supplied His love…but we will be receiving, we will be enjoying, and we will be supplying God's love for all eternity in greater and fuller ways! We will be brought into the love of the Trinity where the Father, Son, and Spirit have always loved - we forever and ever will receive and reflect and receive and reflect the love from God and from one another for all time. Eternity is the place where love reigns.)

Next week I'll be gone but I look forward to getting back and diving into the book of Ephesians with you all.

Pray