



## **1 Corinthians 12:31-14:1a**

### **“WHAT MAKES LOVE STICK?”**

(Sermon Plus Study And Application Questions)

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### **“Following Christ From City Center!”**

I CORINTHIANS 12:31-14:1a "WHAT MAKES LOVE STICK?"

Digression , Demonstration, Aretalogy (Praise) Of Love //1 Esd. 4:34-40

1) 12:31 DESIRE, GIFTS, AND THE MORE EXCELLENT (ALL SURPASSING) WAY.

12:31 You are earnestly desiring the higher (grace) gifts (charismata). They Were Eager For Status Gifts, Not Ethics
And I will show you a still more excellent way. Agape = Love Not Motivated By Beauty But By God's Work In Us

Examples: Mt. 5:44, Lk. 6:27, Rom. 5:8, 8:32

7 Gifts 2) 13:1-3 THE NECESSITY OF LOVE WITH SPIRITUAL GIFTS: 3 CONTRASTS. A-B-A'

1 1 a If I (Paul) speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, Test. Job 48-50, Speech Gifts Without Love Are Annoying
I am a noisy bronze gong or a clanging cymbal. Agape Love = Fruit Of The Spirit, Gifts = Spirit In Action

2 2 b And if I have prophetic powers, Love Is The Only Proper Motive For Spiritual Gifts, Not Status

3-4 and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, Revelatory Gifts //12:8-10

5 and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, Mk. 11:23, Power Gifts Without Love Are Deceptive
I am nothing. It Is Possible To Have Gifts Without Love

3 6 c If I give away all I have, Become Nothing, Without Love We Do Not Exist As God Intends
and if I deliver my body to be burned (to boast), Gifts Of Sacrifice And Martyrdom

7 but have not love, Dan. 3:95 LXX, Sacrifices Without Love Are Unprofitable
I gain nothing. Love Is Everything, v.3 = Gift Of Helping//12:28

Gain Nothing, Life Ultimately Judged By Love, Gift + Love = True Service
Paul Wants All Spiritual Gifts To Be Exercised In Love

3) 13:4-7 THE CHARACTER OF LOVE: 5 POSITIVE & 5 NEGATIVE. Didactic

For Love, Put In Name Of Jesus, Then Your Name, Compare Results!

a) v.4 What Love Does. List Likely Shaped By Corinthian Faults

4 (+1) Love is patient (slow to anger), kind is love; Ps. 34:8, Rom. 2:4(God), vs. 11:22 (Corinthian Behavior)
Focuses On Love's Actions, Love Is Here Personified

b) vv.5-6 What Loves Does Not Do: A List Of 8 Vices + 1 Virtue.

5 (-1) love is not jealous (envious), not conceited (show off); Pairs //3:3, 5:1, 8:1

(-2) it is not arrogant, does not behave improperly (lewd = shameful acts). 4:6, 18-19; 5:2

(-3) Love does not insist on its own way; (Single) 10:33, Not Force But Freedom

(-4) it is not irritable or does not calculate evil; Resent = Keep Record Of Wrongs

6 (-5) it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right (i.e. moral truth). //5:1-8
Love Is A Character Capacity, A Virtue

a') v.7 What Love Does (No limits). Love Means Decision + Effort, Tests Character

7 (+2) Love bears all things, (Puts up with, always protects) What Paul Does With Them!

(+3) believes all things, (Believes the best, always trusts) Love Is Behavior, Not Feeling

(+4) hopes all things, (Hopes for the good, always hopes) //1 Clement 47, 49:5

(+5) endures all things. (Endures every trial, always perseveres) Mature Love Is Strong
Love Is Not Mere Feeling/ Sentiment Or Foolish/Gullible

Love Never Fails 2') 13:8-13 THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE BEYOND SPIRITUAL GIFTS: 3 CONTRASTS.

8 (a) Love never ends (falls/fails); Durability, Cannot Be Defeated, Builds On Endures Of v.7d

(b) as for prophecies, they will pass away; //14:4, 24, Spiritual Gifts Are For Now
as for tongues, they will cease; Paul Had Experience With Many Gifts

9 as for knowledge, it will pass away.//7:31 This World Passes Away
For our knowledge is imperfect Reason "For," The Best Is Still Not Perfect

10 and our prophecy is imperfect; All Gifts Are Temporarily & Very Useful
but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. Parousia/Arrival, //15:24-29, End Of Age

11 c) When I was a child, //3:1-4, (Present)
I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; i.e. Immaturely
when I became a man (adult), Corinthians Loved Flashy Gifts, Like Children

12 I gave up childish ways. Thinking, Taken To Task For Lack Of Love, Deep Irony
Bronze Corinthian Mirrors, 2 Cor. 3:18

(b') For now we see in a mirror dimly (in a riddle), Incomplete Prophetic Vision, (Future)
but then face to face. As With Moses, Num. 12:6-8 (LXX), Gen. 32:30

Now I know in part; Modesty Is Appropriate
then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. God Knows Me Now!

Love Abides Faith Is Hope's Ground, Love Its Fruit //Col. 1:4-5, 1 Thess. 1:3, 5:8

13 (a') Now faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. 16:14, Divine 3 Virtues, //v.7bc
No Need For Faith/Hope In New Age, Spiritual Gifts Do Not Make Us Perfect

1') 14:1a LOVE, DESIRE, AND SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN ORDER. God's Grace Enables This Love

14:1 Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts (charismata), especially that you may prophesy.

## WHAT MAKES LOVE STICK?

*“Make love your aim, and earnestly desire spiritual gifts....”*

If we aim at the first, we shall have the second as well.

### I C O R I N T H I A N S 1 4 : 1

**F**rench geneticist and Nobel prize winner Jacques Monod once shared a television interview with Mother Teresa. He spoke of how human destiny was locked up in our genes which shape and direct our character and outlook, thus destroying our illusions of freedom. It was a classic statement of the modern philosophy of biological determinism.

As he held forth, Mother Teresa sat with eyes closed and hands folded- deep in prayer. On being asked by the host if she had anything to add, she replied: "I believe in love and compassion," then resumed her devotions.

As Monod was leaving he was heard to mutter, "If I saw much more of that woman I should be in bad trouble!"<sup>1</sup>

He would, rather, have been in *good* trouble. That's how it is with the saints; they see and speak so clearly it hurts, and in very few words. The professors's world view was limited to analytical knowledge alone- what can be reproduced and measured in the lab, but Mother Teresa had found *the more excellent way*. In another place she said, "I have found the paradox that if you love until it hurts, then there is no hurt, but only more love."<sup>2</sup>

God did not create the world because company was needed and God lonely. Such a being would not be the God of the Bible but a modern, psychologized, chummy deity who needs a good therapist. How utterly silly, and yet how widely popular: a god made-over in our image. On the Christian reading, creation is not a sign of lack in God. Creation is a gift of love, an overflow of divine life into something other than itself to which is granted a

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<sup>1</sup> Kitty Muggeridge, "Gazing on Truth," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 29, no. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Manser, editor, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Quotations* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2002), 236.

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**I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 4**

measure of freedom and independence for the sake of a relationship.<sup>3</sup> In the act of creation God engages in self-limitation for the sake of love. The world is given the awful possibility of resisting its Creator and true end, which it in fact does with disastrous consequences as the world is infected with rebellion, distrust, sin, chaos, evil, and death. This is our world, a world that God does not abandon but continues to embrace.

To say that God is fully blessed and needs nothing outside the divine life is not to claim God is isolated or insulated. God is not a solitary unit but a complex unity. One truth of the Trinity is that the one God is a union and communion of three - God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit- continually pouring love into one another in self-giving and mutual indwelling.<sup>4</sup> There is an unending dance of love within the relations that constitute the being of the One and living God.<sup>5</sup> Love did not start with us; love is grounded in the life of the Triune God as the deepest grain of the universe. Love is not just something God does, an outward behavior that might change; love is who God is. The center of the heart of God is holy love, and- when you think of it- love requires at least two, and the bond of love between them may be thought of as a third. The lover, the beloved, and the bond between them is one analogy for the Triune God of Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> The Father as love, the Son as beloved, and the Spirit as the personal bond between them. The is the One Jesus the Son embodies in his history and in his great rescue mission.

The simplest description is 1 John 4:8, “God is love.” All that is, from the atom to the

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<sup>3</sup> See John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985) for a breakthrough treatment of this topic from an Orthodox angle. For a Protestant treatment, Theresa F. Latini, *The Church And The Crisis Of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), Chapter, 4, “The Church As Multi-dimensional *Koinonia*,” 75-97.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth wrote, “In Himself (God) does not will to exist for Himself, to exist alone. On the contrary, He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and therefore alive in His unique being with and for and in another.... He does not exist in solitude but in fellowship” (*Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.W. Bromiley [Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1956-1975], II/1, 275).

<sup>5</sup> The technical name is *perichoresis*, literally the *dance around*. The internal life of God, who God is in himself, is a dynamic of giving and receiving love.

<sup>6</sup> First attributed to Augustine. The weakness of the analogy is that while *lover* and *beloved* are clearly personal terms, the idea of a *bond* is less personal and so not adequate for the full personhood of the Holy Spirit. All analogies, however helpful, remain partial and need to be supplemented by other models for fuller apprehension.

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**I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 5**

vast expanding curvature of space, is made by and for love. We were designed to share in the joy of God's own life, and one day we will do just that. Now a foretaste, then the full banquet. The earth, and we with it, shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.<sup>7</sup> Fish were made for water, and we were made for love because we are made in God's image. Faith in Jesus and the love we receive from him through the Spirit is only a sneak peak of coming attractions. It's only going to get better. Which means Mother Theresa knows more about Reality with a *Capital R* that all the learned professors learned opinions. That is the ultimate litmus test. St. Augustine wrote, "He who is filled with love is filled with God himself."<sup>8</sup>

And therefore all sins- big and little, are violations of love. Sin makes us small and curves us in on ourselves; love makes our hearts and lives larger. Sin is toxic, dangerous, and deadly; it aims to cut off our capacity to receive and give what is most real and the only thing that satisfies the heart. Our hearts were made for love because our hearts were made by the Great Lover, the one and Triune God, who coaxes us away from all that is not love.

Love makes us more real because it makes us more like God. This was never more clear than when as a young pastor I was sitting in a hospital room with an old family friend who was not far from entering the valley of the shadow. Her name was Edith Hurt, and this once beautiful woman had been facially scarred by a car wreck and mangled by multiple cancer surgeries. Both breasts removed and a hysterectomy. By her own reckoning- though not mine- she felt less than fully female. Though a believer, her troubles and the nearness of death made her wonder, "How can God accept me, since I am so in pieces?" I tried Scripture and prayer, but it didn't get through. Too familiar. Theological reasoning about the nature of the resurrection body didn't help. Too abstract. I said, "Tomorrow I will read you a book." I took it as an idea from the Lord, the gift of the word of wisdom. The next day I read her *The Velveteen Rabbit*. In it is found this famous passage:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real. It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to those who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 11:9.

<sup>8</sup> Manser, *The Westminster Dictionary*, 236.

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**I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 6**

off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."<sup>9</sup>

I looked up at Edie. Love was all around us like a cloud. I felt like a real pastor; she a woman made whole again. I buried her not long after that and left the grave with a tear and smile. I will see her again, when we both are made real by love in the resurrection kingdom.

“Love never ends, fall, or fails,” said Paul. It cannot be defeated because it is grounded in the Triune being of God. There’s always more to draw on; this well has no bottom. So if this is true, then the first of Paul’s two final commands makes sense. “Make love your aim,” in imitation of one who said, “Love the Lord your God with heart and mind and soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>10</sup> We are to become experts at love, the cross-shaped kind shown to us in Jesus Christ. Love has a tale to tell. This is the love we hear about on Sundays and practice all week in the factory of love and holy living called *Main Street Church*. We are a university of God’s love in which all are invited to enroll as lifelong learners. The only perfection Christians are offered is the invitation to be perfected in love, which John Wesley said was the key reason God raised up the Methodists.<sup>11</sup>

What is love? An art and a science, a slow growing fruit of the Holy Spirit in the orchard of the soul, and the deepest wisdom of all. Love is informed by Scripture, energized by prayer, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit; it is fed to us in the sacrament, practiced in community, refined in study, worked out in sweat and tears, and modeled for us in Jesus Christ. It’s the only thing we carry to heaven. Love is the most glorious human capacity. By *faith* we trust a God we cannot see; by *hope* we lean towards a future we cannot create, but it is divine *love* that pulls us forward like a great magnet and gives us power to persevere. One day faith will be sight and hope no longer necessary; only God’s love and our

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<sup>9</sup> PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 12:30-31a.

<sup>11</sup> Wesley’s best summary remains *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, <http://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/perfect>. I encourage readers to download and read Wesley’s grand vision of a dynamic growth in sanctification. For a defense against detractors, see Thomas Oden, *John Wesley’s Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 237-257. Other key texts are the sermon on Hebrews 6:1, “On Perfection,” [www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/Global-Worship-and-Spiritual-Growth/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-76-On-Perfection](http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/Global-Worship-and-Spiritual-Growth/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-76-On-Perfection); “The Character of a Methodist,” [www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/Global-Worship-and-Spiritual-Growth/The-Wesleys-and-Their-Times/The-Character-of-a-Methodist](http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/Global-Worship-and-Spiritual-Growth/The-Wesleys-and-Their-Times/The-Character-of-a-Methodist).

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participation in it will abide. Not long before his martyrdom, the American prophet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church:

“If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long.... Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize; that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards; that's not important.... I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.”<sup>12</sup>

“Make love your aim,” Paul commanded, because it is the only aim worthy of a Jesus-follower. It will deepen and stretch and cause you to cry out for mercy. It will mature you in faith and perfect you in hope. It will break your heart with what breaks the heart of God and let you see the bright beauty hidden in every little thing. Divine love adds a razor's edge and nearly unbearable sweetness to life. Love will open you to an array of spiritual gifts—little packets of divine energy that show up just when needed. The love of God will make you cry and laugh and then drive you into contemplative silence. And if you make being transformed by love your goal, it will tame fear and give you the right words at the right time. *Courage* is what love in the face of danger looks like; *patience* is love's strategy in the face of frustration; *kindness* is the approachable face of love; *study* is love seeking understanding; *endurance* is love's sticking power and *worship* its highest honor. Love in the midst of this world's pain is communion with the sufferings and joy of Jesus Christ. In his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis wrote about the non-safety of love:

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping your heart intact—you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries, avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safely in the casket of your selfishness. And in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will not change, it will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable and irredeemable. The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the dangers of love is hell."<sup>13</sup>

### **TURNING TO THE TEXT**

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<sup>12</sup> William Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 53.

<sup>13</sup> PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 13.

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## **I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 8**

### **1-2) 12:31-13:3 The Necessity Of Love With Spiritual Gifts.**

The Corinthian believers were fascinated with the phenomena of the Holy Spirit and the powers of the risen Lord working through them. Good for them; would that we were more curious in this area of the supernatural dimensions of biblical spirituality. To have the grace of God come through you in a miracle or a message for someone else is intoxicating, as I can testify. Paul commended them with perhaps a little sarcasm in verse 31, “You are earnestly desiring the higher gifts.” Nothing wrong with that. What they were missing was the reason for the gifts which was to build one another up in love. So Paul appealed to their sense of adventure in the second half of the verse, “And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

Finding the precise word to capture what came to expression in Jesus posed a vocabulary problem for the early church. We use the word *love* for the trivial and the great: I love cheeseburgers, and I love my wife. The Greeks, on the other hand, had multiple words for different shades of love. *Philia* is friendship; *storge* is family love and loyalty; *eros* is the desire for fulfillment in sexual love with a beautiful other. Then there was the word *agape*, a rarely used noun. So Christians took this shell of a word and filled it with new meaning. It is God’s love shown in Christ, then through his people because he is with them and in them. It means “others-centered concern expressed at great personal cost.”<sup>14</sup> It is the *God so loved the world* and *Jesus on the cross* kind of love. And it gives because it is the nature of this love to behave this way. The quality is governed by the giver, not by the receiver. You can reject it, but you can’t turn it off, just as you can hide in darkness but never unplug the sun. It shines on the just and the unjust.

On April 6, 2000, Ricky and Toni Sexton were taken hostage inside their Wytheville, Virginia home. Toni had taken her poodle out when Dennis Lewis and Angela Tanner roared up the driveway, pointed pistols, and yelled at her to get back inside the house.

Inside, the Sextons... listened to their captors' troubles, fed them, showed them gospel videos, read to them from the Bible, prayed and cried with them.

During negotiations with police, Ricky Sexton refused his own release when Lewis and Tanner suggested they might end the standoff by committing suicide. The standoff had an unusual ending. Before surrendering, Angela Tanner left \$135.00 and a note that read: ‘Thank you for your hospitality. We really appreciate it. I hope he gets better. Wish all luck & love. Please accept this. It really is all we have to offer. Love, Angela and Dennis.’<sup>15</sup>

*Agape* love was there in that home before April 6, 2000. To love this way is always

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<sup>14</sup> P. Barnett, *1 Corinthians* (Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 245.

<sup>15</sup> *The Roanoke Times*, 4-8-00, A-1

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## I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 9

the right thing to do. Practice it now in little things; you may need it later on in big ones!

Now because this passage has been read at so many weddings, clarification is needed. This is not a passage about love as *eros*, as romantic attraction to beauty and pleasure. It may have a secondary application to marital relationships, but that is not the focus. So when a bride says to me, "Pastor Phil, I want *the love chapter* read at the wedding," I ask about the spelling. Is that l-o-v-e or l-u-v? Depending on their answer I may suggest an alternative reading from *The Song Of Solomon* which is a book of hot love poetry at the center of the Old Testament. 1 Corinthians 13, however, is about the practice of love in a local congregation of cranky people fascinated with God's power and not much else.

This *Jesus-defined* kind of love involves kindness and patience, but it is not about tolerance as popularly conceived. It is not an anything-goes kind of approval. This love refuses to surrender moral grounding and delights in God's good law. Note the contrast:

Tolerance says, "You must approve of what I do."

Love says, "I must do something harder: I will love you, even when your behavior offends me."

Tolerance says, "You must agree with me."

Love responds, "I must do something harder: I will tell you the truth, because I am convinced 'the truth will set you free.'"

Tolerance says, "You must allow me to have my way."

Love replies, "I must do something harder: I will plead with you to follow the right way, because I believe you are worth the risk."<sup>16</sup>

Paul is not here speaking about romantic attraction, and he is not lauding modern tolerance. Agape is love joined to truth and strung up on a cross. Truth without love becomes mean, and love without truth becomes mushy and sentimental. Agape is love plus truth plus the willingness to suffer for both for the welfare of other people. It is Jesus.

Paul begins his analysis with supernatural speech in verse 1, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Many Methodists laugh at tongue-speaking in the sophistication of our ignorance. But it is a potent gift of the Holy Spirit- a kind of *Channel B* for mystical prayer. It is, as Paul notes, the language of angels. But if it remains a *look at me* thing and a cause of spiritual pride, then it's worthless as a noisy gong in one of the pagan services of ancient Corinth.

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<sup>16</sup> PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 13.

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**I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 10**

To some the Spirit gives a gift of prophecy which is the capacity to hear and speak a word from God for the moment within the bounds of Scripture. It is the most valuable spiritual gift says Paul, one we should desire. Pastors like me teach the principles of the faith; prophets make it direct and personal. As Paul concluded, “Make love your aim, and earnestly desire spiritual gifts, *especially that you may prophesy.*” For years I’ve keep a journal of prophetic words been spoken to me. But if not rooted in love, revelation gifts like prophesy and faith for miracles are a dead end. If I have these without love, Paul says, “I produce nothing, am nothing, gain nothing.” And while they are not the same, spiritual gifts and the multiple fruits of love are designed to go together, as modeled for us in the life of Jesus who was love and power operating in one integrated life.

In verse 3 we come to personal sacrifice, to the gifts of martyrdom and extreme giving, but here again you can do the right things for the wrong reasons. Neither charismatics or social action liberals are safe with Paul. So if you are trying to prove something through your giving, and if the motive is something less than love, guess what? You gain nothing. You can even die in some great cause and it amount to nothing. Agatho, a desert monk of fourth-century, "If an angry man raises the dead, God is still displeased with his anger."<sup>17</sup> Love is the only proper environment for the mature operation of powerful and exciting spiritual gifts. The focus is not on the one who exercises the gift but the one for whom it is exercised. So when the gifts begin to flow more freely here at Main Street, and if God turns up the light of divine revelation, we will have lots to learn about love.

**3) vv.4-7 Love Has An Etiquette.**

In a cartoon a pastor stands at the church door after the service. A woman shakes his hand, “Pastor, that was a great sermon on patience, only it was five minutes too long.”

“Love is as love does.” Didn’t Forest Gump say something like that? Well so did Paul, who shifts from one mode to another in verses 4 through 7. Five things love does are balanced by five things it does not do, and in this case the *negatives* are at the center.

Paul was a great pastor, a skilled writer, and not a bad social psychologist. His catalog of virtues and vices are customized for the Corinthian situation. Behind each of these words is a local story. They- as the rest of the letter indicates, were impatient and unkind, envious of each other gifts and show-offs with their own. They had short fuses, kept long lists of how others had wronged them. They assumes Christian freedom gave license for sexual immorality. They were easily discouraged and had little sticking power. They didn’t bear

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<sup>17</sup> “Sayings of the Desert Fathers,” translated by Owen Chadwick, in *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1983).

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## **I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 11**

much, believe much, hope much, or endure much. They were an immature mess, and what Paul says here is “What love is, you folk are not yet,” but he did it in such a kind way.<sup>18</sup>

There is an etiquette to love; love has manners, and to find how you’re doing, simply insert your name where the word *love* occurs, for example: “Is Phil patient and kind? Is Phil arrogant or rude?”<sup>19</sup> It hurts to measure yourself against the true standard. Better yet, if you have true courage, have your spouse or a child or coworker give you an evaluation. On the specific issue of resentment, which has to do with keeping mental lists of wrongs and plotting revenge, hear the testimony of a wise wife:

"A grandmother, celebrating her golden wedding anniversary, told the secret of her long, happy marriage. 'On my wedding day, I decided to make a list of ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of our marriage, I would overlook,' she said.

A guest asked what some of the faults were. She replied, 'To tell you the truth, dearie, I never did get around to listing them. But whenever he did something that made me hopping mad, I said to myself, Lucky for him that's one of the ten!' "<sup>20</sup>

### **2') vv.8-13 The Only Thing That Lasts.**

Thus far Paul has spoken about the necessity of love and the character it demonstrates. In the last large section, verses 8 through 13, he speaks of love’s permanence, that it alone lasts. His pastoral goal is to put spiritual gifts, especially the outwardly impressive ones, in proper context. They are important but only temporary, so use them to serve God, but remember they are the toys and tools of childhood, one day to be packed away and forgotten.

When the war is over, the need for weapons is gone as well, and that is what spiritual gifts are: divine weapons to build up the church and advance the kingdom of God. When the kingdom comes and the king rules, they are rendered useless. As the old spiritual teaches, “I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside. Ain’t gonna study war no more.” There will be no prophets in the coming kingdom, no tongue speakers, no pastors and teachers, no miracle workers, no need for healers or administrators, only God’s adopted

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<sup>18</sup> This mirror reading of vv.4-7 is backed by ample evidence in the letter.

<sup>19</sup> For a fresh examination from the perspective of spiritual formation, see James Bryan Smith, *The Good And Beautiful God* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2009), Chapter 5, “God is Love,” 92-11, which include a lectio divina exercise on today’s text, 108-11.

<sup>20</sup> PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 13.

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**I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 12**

children one and all. But in the here-and-now we need them all desperately, else we cannot do our work or wage our warfare. One reason our Methodist churches are weak and ineffective is that we have not recognized and welcomed all the gifts. We have become skeptical of the supernatural and allergic to the fact that God continues to speak and act in our midst. Unlike our more daring and experimental forebears, are frankly embarrassed by religious experience if it reaches the least bit beyond conventional morality and middle class manners.<sup>21</sup> Our love has grown cold, our faith weak, our hope thin.

For Paul to claim three times in short succession that *love never fails*, that *love abides*, and that *the greatest of these is love* is to root love in the being and purpose of God shown to us in Jesus Christ. This is the love that identifies, love that comes near, love that offers truth, love that will not compromise with lies, love that purges evil, love that enters suffering willingly and innocently, then rejoices in the new life of resurrection. This is not love in general or love as a feeling or love as a philosophical ideal; this is love with a address in Nazareth and an appointment with a Jerusalem cross. Love is the person and work of Jesus Christ as found in the Four Gospels. Faith is betting that he was right, that he was vindicated by God, and that at the end of history he stands alone and unchallenged as the rightful ruler of the cosmos. The church exists to embody and carry this message to the ends of the earth. For all our flaws we are the custodians of divine revelation.

As good and necessary as they are, all the revelatory gifts, meaning prophecy, tongues, knowledge and the rest, are decidedly imperfect, which is why they can never be a sole criteria for divine guidance apart from Scripture and communal discernment. Never make a major decision based on a prophecy or on a dream by itself. Consult Scripture, consult your pastor and other mature believers, pray and fast and above all, be patient and continue to listen. God will confirm his word through different and complementary avenues. Faith is not foolishness. If you really want to hear from God, a way will find you.<sup>22</sup>

None of us are yet mature. Some are older and wiser, more savvy, but according to Paul none of us are yet adult in the full sense. That is reserved for the next life. Look at all the ways we mistreat another. Our best preaching is the speaking of a child, our best theology the thoughts of a child, our best thinking the logic of a child. Not wrong in itself, just immature. To the citizens of heaven we must appear like one, big, chaotic, mean

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<sup>21</sup> For a revealing sample of neglected materials, see Daniel R. Jennings, *The Supernatural Occurrences of John Wesley* (Sean Multimedia, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> On personal guidance, see Dallas Willard, *In Search of Guidance: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2012; and for groups Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2012).

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## **I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 13**

playground where the devil is the chief bully and where all too many cooperate with him. When Paul speaks about becoming adult and giving up childish ways he is not demeaning the role of spiritual gifts. He is arguing they be practiced in love, and he is saying that when the kingdom comes and we finally leave our human childhood, all the gifts will be put away. We will leave them behind as we left behind dirty diapers, thumb-sucking, and whining.

To make the same point yet a third way Paul turns to the image of a brass mirror in verse 12. Even the best in that world were wavy, like the crazy mirrors at carnival side shows. The inhabitants of heaven see us clearly, but on our side everything is fuzzy and distorted, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.” Love is the reason; the gifts of the Spirit are the practical tools; the church is the setting where we practice getting love right; the fallen world is the stage of our struggle, and we are all headed towards a great collision when the kingdom of God will swamp this world and remove all resistance. Even now we *are fully understood*, and that is a great comfort to me. Sometimes all I can pray is, “Lord, you know me in ways I do not know myself. Have mercy on me a sinner.”

### **Conclusion**

Kenneth Boa wrote, “Our calling and purpose as followers of Christ is to love God completely, to love self correctly, and to love others compassionately.” Alan Chalmers wrote, “The grand essentials of happiness are: something to do, something to love, and something to hope for.” Martin Luther King wrote, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”<sup>23</sup>

Quotes could be multiplied; there is no lack of commentators on the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love. The first two are preliminary. When Reality arrives, faith will be sight and what we have hoped for fully realized. Important as they are, faith and hope remain temporary; they have an expiration date. Only divine love and its satisfactions will remain into the kingdom of God, which is why the love of God that meets us in Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit in the church is the ground of all reality and the one sure foundation on which to build a life. Frederick Beuchner has written:

“Of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Idem.

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## **I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 14**

If hell is anything, it is testimony that God will have fellowship only with those who love him in return. Hell is testimony to freedom misused and love rejected. Divine love invites; it never coerces.<sup>25</sup>

There is a simple two-part formula for the renewal of any church. Messy, but not complicated, It could happen here, starting today. A big dose of divine love will lead us to God's priorities, and a fresh outbreak of spiritual gifts will put us all on the front lines of kingdom service. Only two blockages stand in the way, the ugly, smelly, despicable, devilish, God-hated sins of unforgiveness and pride, both of which are currently in large supply. This is why Paul ended his great treatment of divine love and its earthly effects with a dual command:

- 1) "Make love your aim," said Paul,
- 2) "and earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."

Not one or the other as if there was a choice, but both. The aim is a church full of Jesus' love *and* Jesus' power. Is this something we want to ask God to do in our midst? Or do we want something a bit more manageable?

There is a simple prayer I wrote for today's service. It is, "May you be filled with the fires of divine love." If you come to the altar, someone will lay a hand on your head and pray that prayer. Or, you may pray it in the pew, "May I be filled with the fires of divine love." Or, you may come forward after the service. But be forewarned. It is a dangerous and disruptive prayer. What is God answered and filled you with the fires of divine love?

Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC, September 16, 2012

### **STUDY AND APPLICATION QUESTIONS**

#### **I Cor. 12:31**

1. What words or phrases are found in 12:21 and 14:1a? How does this mark the paragraph?
2. What did Paul praise in 12:31? What was still lacking?

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<sup>25</sup> U.M. teaching is found in our *Confession of Faith*, Article XII -The Judgment and the Future State, "We believe all men stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation" (*BOD 2008*, 70).

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## **I Corinthians 12:31-14:1a ..... 15**

### **1 Cor. 13:1-3**

3. What is the basic contrast in the three stanzas of vv.1-3? Why is love so important?
4. How many spiritual gifts do you count in vv.1-3? I find language gifts (v.1), power gifts (vv.2-5), and sacrificial gifts (vv.6-7)? How does each set build up the church?

### **1 Cor. 13:4-7**

5. Why is it important to know both how love behaves and how it does not behave?
6. Use p. 16 to evaluate yourself. How did you do? What needs work?
7. Who do you know that approximates the picture of love found in these verses?

### **1 Cor. 13:8-13, 14:1**

8. List the differences between life in this present world and the coming kingdom.
9. What will pass away, and what will abide? Why do faith and hope pass away?
10. Read 14:1 aloud. Are you aiming at love? How would we know it?
11. Where have you experienced the gifts of the Spirit through you to another?

### **PRAYER**

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Let us pray:

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,  
you have made us for yourself and for the fellowship of the Holy Trinity,  
and our hearts are restless and searching till they find rest in you.  
You have promised that if we drew near to you,  
you would draw near to us and claim us as your people.  
Because of your great love in Jesus Christ,  
we dare to draw near to your holiness and majesty with confidence.  
May your Holy Spirit bring down upon us the kingdom that is above.  
Illuminate the Holy Scriptures as they are read and preached,  
and may we feel the flame of divine love  
burning in our breasts and changing our deepest desires.  
Speak to us as we wait in silence before you. You are our God.  
Amen. (All pray in silence, seeking the presence of God.)**

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