

A Sermon on Love by Anita Jackson



The fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 30, 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 – And the Greatest of These is Love

In last week's reading from 1 Corinthians Chapter 12 we heard about the church in Corinth and all the spiritual gifts they possessed – speaking in tongues, prophecy etc. and yet Paul ended the chapter by reminding them that Love was the greatest gift.

Today we heard 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 – the Love Chapter – you’ve probably heard it hundreds of times – everyone knows it – How many of you used it at your wedding? I know I did

Paul tells us that love is the greatest of all and demonstrates the supremacy of love over all other things as the measure of our lives. This entire chapter is one of the most beautiful and meaningful passages in all of Scripture.

Verses 1-3 answer the **“How”** question: “How does God measure our lives?” The answer is: “Love.” The song Seasons of Love from Rent – one of my all-time favorite shows says the same thing. Nothing we say, nothing we have, nothing we do has any lasting value apart from love. Love is the standard by which God measures our lives.

Paul’s message to the Corinthians is the same for us today – we cannot measure the value of our words by the impressiveness of our speech. We cannot measure our spiritual maturity by the extent of our gifts. We cannot measure the size of our reward by the depth of our sacrifice. The words that we speak, the gifts that we have, the sacrifices that we make – none of these have any value apart from love

Verses 4-7 answer the **“What”** question: “If love is the standard by which God measures our lives, then what is love? The answer is: “Love is patient, love is kind, etc.” Or basically, love is like Jesus.

The qualities Paul has described here are really the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our life. It is only as we yield to God and his Spirit asking him to change us that he will make us into a more loving person.

I heard someone suggest taking your own name and plugging it into verses 4-7 wherever you see the word love to see how you

measure up. If you're like me, you won't get very far before you get discouraged

I think a better suggestion is to take Jesus' name and plug it in wherever you see the word love. "Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. He does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud. He is not rude, he is not self-seeking, he is not easily angered, he keeps no record of wrongs. Jesus does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. He always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." Is there anyone here who would decline a relationship that had all those qualities? Is there anyone who would turn that kind of love away?

This is the love that God has shown us through Jesus. This is the love we turn away when we don't practice it with one another.

Jesus is the only one who truly fulfills this beautiful picture of love. Meditate on the beauty of his character. And let God do his work in your life, transforming you ever more into the likeness of Christ by the power of his Spirit. That is the secret to growing in love.

Verses 8-13 answer the "Why" question: "Why does God measure our lives according to love?" The answer is: "Because love is the greatest thing of all." Spiritual gifts are temporary and partial. Love is permanent and complete. Even faith will change to sight, and hope will change to fulfillment, but love will never be replaced. Love lasts forever. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

The passage closes with Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love. It is beautiful, inspiring, and lofty. It is one of those verses in Scripture that should be written on our hearts, that should be an anchor we can cling to, that we can return to over and over as a tool with which to examine our lives – a way to define

them.

Definitions matter and who we allow to define certain vitally important words for us also matters

Faith – Hope –Love Great words. But this week as I prepared, I asked myself this question: who defines those for us? Of the voices around us telling what faith is, what hope is, what love is, which one do we listen to and believe?

Let's take the first word. Faith. What is that? And who defines that for us? We can turn to our culture for a definition of faith:

If we look to the news: when the newspapers or TV or internet broadcasters talk about faith, what are they reporting? Mostly, American politicians evoking it to get votes and grab power; or they talk about extremists who march with signs telling us who and what God hates, or who bomb marketplaces full of innocent people because of their faith.

I reject our culture's definitions and portrayals of faith. It is NOT about getting power or about ramming an extreme point of view down other people's throats. That is not faith!

Instead, if I let God's Word define faith, I get a definition that is about knowing, believing, and obeying. Knowing – you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free; believing – believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved; obeying – those who love me will obey my commands. Those 3, together, are what the Bible calls faith. Now that makes sense as something that will last forever

The second thing on Paul's list is hope. Who defines that for us? If we let our culture define hope, we hear phrases like – I hope I win the lottery, or I hope they live happily ever after, or I hope that war and disease and evil all go away someday or the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best.

Do we want to let our culture define hope for us? If so, then it is nothing more than a feeling that we can have what we want; and most likely it is so remote a possibility (e.g.: winning the lottery or having a perfect world on earth) that anyone who actually believes that for which they hope would be at best delusional and in denial, and at worst certifiably crazy.

I reject our culture's definitions and portrayals of hope. It is NOT a vague feeling about getting what we want. That is not hope!

Instead, let God's Word define hope, and we get a definition that hope is a future certainty. It is not a vague wish – it is something that WILL happen, it just hasn't yet, so we hold on to that hope. It is a sure and certain thing, an expectation, and it is rooted in Jesus. Jesus is our hope, we hold on to a hope of eternal life, a hope of heaven: none of those are vague uncertainties or feelings of something we want that may or may not happen: the promises of Scripture are way too strong for that! They are certainties, truths, realities, that exist in a certain future.

That is what the Bible calls hope. Now that makes sense as something that will last forever.

Paul says, the greatest of these is love.

Do I need to spend much time on how our culture defines love? Probably not, I think most of us would agree the messages we get are not helpful. Just consider how the word is used generally as a noun – describing – person, place, or thing. We say, I love pizza, I binge watched a show on Netflix and loved it, I love your shoes or your hat – they mean simply things we want a stronger word than like to describe how we feel about them. When I listen closely, I also hear a craving for something deeper, something real, so maybe even our culture is looking for a better definition. I typed into Google the words

Love for God and it said there were about 612,000,000 results. I believe that I can say that love is something that is very important to every one of us.

What is Love? Love is a verb – an action word. We use the word love so casually but this type of love – agape – is based on a decision regardless of emotion – I love in spite of how I feel

We need to learn to think Biblically, and let the Bible, rather than the culture, define the words that matter most. When we cling to verses like 1 Cor 13:13, with the words faith, hope, and love, we need to be clinging to those concepts as defined by God, not by the watered down, vague, poor imitations that our world suggests as the meanings. Faith is about knowing, believing, and obeying. Hope is a sure certainty of things yet to come. And love? Best defined simply by knowing and experiencing Jesus.

We have heard this passage so many times it's easy to zone out and say I know that one but as I thought about our theme as I was preparing to speak today – **Where does God's love become visible to you?** I remembered some experiences from my past

Growing up in the Catholic church I read my Bible, prayed, received the Sacraments but I never thought about having a relationship with God – I didn't feel loved or loveable so why would I expect God to love me?

You see, I grew up in a home where there were no hugs, no words of love – both of my parents believed that if my physical needs (food, clothes, shelter, education) were met then my emotional needs weren't important. I was told that I didn't have to love them I just had to listen –They weren't monsters – I know they did the best they could and that they were proud of my accomplishments – I was a straight A student, involved with youth group at church, participated in various school activities, and volunteered in the community. I became

very focused on doing and I was always busy – now we would call it FOMO – fear of missing out – but I was never sure if it was enough, if I was enough, which led me to make some very poor choices and suffer the consequences.

Fast forward to 2004 when I moved to London –I was depressed, in a dead-end relationship and approaching 50 – it was a wonderful opportunity to work abroad. I needed a change, and this was a perfect chance to reinvent myself. I started attending an evangelical church on a barge in Canary Wharf where they had a ministry to the workers in the area before starting a community church. I met Christians at my company and around East London. The two women who oversaw the women's ministry welcomed me into a body of believers. Hannah and Jenny knew that our deepest desire as human beings is to be loved and to be understood. I was 3000 miles away from home with no friends or family. They came along side of me and they loved me, in this case – love was the pursuit of relationship and they demonstrated in tangible ways that if a relationship is worth having it's worth a bit of effort to keep it going.

We would meet up before work to read Scripture together over cups of tea. They included me in lunches and dinner parties so that I could meet others in the church. They told me that God is love – that God loved us first – while we were yet sinners; that God loved me – that love was his character – they encouraged me to use the Bible as my highest authority rather than reason, religion and rituals, institutions or my experience.

They showed me that God's love for me was real – God cared about everything concerning me and God's love is not conditional – it can't be earned – there was nothing I could do to make him love me more or love me less. Nothing could separate me from the love of God. God's love never fails, and He pursues relationship with me.

There is also a difference between thinking, knowing, and

experiencing the Love of God. Only the Holy Spirit can make you feel the kind of Love God has for you. We know theory, we can read in the Bible about love but it is nothing compared to how that love feels.

I always thought I was a Christian because I believed in God, but I learned that it was so much more. In April of 2006 in the shadow of the Matterhorn I accepted God's gift of salvation while on a mission trip to Zermatt and in July 2011 I was baptized (again) at Jones Beach in New York.

As I grew in my faith my doing became more about showing God's love to others in a practical way. From handing out granola bars to harried New Yorkers and inviting them to hear the Good News to serving breakfast to hundreds on Saturday mornings at the end of the month when many didn't know where their next meal would come from until their checks arrived, to serving lunch in the park to volunteering in soup kitchens and stocking food pantries.

When I arrived in Takoma Park as I wandered around to get to know the area, I passed this storefront church and the sign on the window mentioned peace and justice which resonated deeply with me and piqued my curiosity. One Sunday I came in and took a seat in the circle and knew I had found a home. The Seekers community welcomed me and provided opportunities to grow my faith as I examine my call, look at the tough issues that face our world and use my gifts to serve where I can. I see evidence of God's love in the care that is shown in so many thoughtful and intentional ways.

Three things remain – Faith Hope and Love – and the greatest of these is Love.

May God help us to measure our lives according to that which will truly last – the measure of love – to make us a more loving people, that our lives may be channels of God's love spilling over to other people and all of creation each and

every day that we live. God is love. And we are to love others as Christ loved us.

May it be so