



The Most Important Thing

1 Corinthians 13

Speaker: Dr. Scott Dudley

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Go ahead and have a seat. It's great to see all of you here. Thank you for coming. Also, those of you who are joining online, thank you for being here. Isn't electricity a wonderful invention? Like, nothing like not having it till you realize, dang, yeah.

So, today is the last sermon in a series that we have been doing all fall on how the most important characteristic of a follower of Jesus is, what? Love. I was afraid you weren't going to be able to answer that, and 11 weeks of preaching would have been a waste.

And today's text is the same one we've looked at the last couple of weeks, 1st Corinthians 13. So, one last time, here it is:

If I speak in the tongues of men or angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I'm nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It's not proud. It does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

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

This is an awesome passage. I love this passage. Everyone loves this passage. Even people who don't go to church have heard it read at weddings or at funerals or heard it in movies and that sort of thing. And it's really poetic. It's very beautiful. You hear it and you think, "Oh, it's so beautiful. It's so inspiring." But it's actually a rebuke.

The Apostle Paul is writing this to the church in the city of Corinth, and it's not meant to be pretty. He's scolding them. Corinth was a very wealthy city, a highly educated city, a lot of successful people there, and they worshiped the goddess of love, Venus. And the way they did that was to have sex with temple prostitutes in the goddess's temple. So, it was also a highly sexualized city. There was even a word that had been invented about Corinth— *to Corinthianize*—which meant to live an utterly depraved and immoral lifestyle.

How would you feel if they did that about us? *To Bellevue-fy, or Bothellate, or Redmondize*, right? That would be kind of a bummer. And it was a city where people thought that the good life was having a lot of money, a prestigious career, and lots of sexual freedom. And if you don't think that sounds like the Seattle area, then you must be a tourist, because that's pretty much what we live in today.

And in this chapter, Paul rebukes them because they are not marked by Jesus' love. Now, how do you think he came up with this list of things? Do you think someone said, "Hey, Paul, what is love?" and he just started spouting poetry? No, he's listing things that the Corinthians were not doing. They were fighting with each other over how worship should go. They were suing each other. One guy was sleeping with his stepmother, and they were like, "Well done, you."

So Paul says, *You worship the goddess of love, but your understanding of love is wrecking your lives and other people's lives*. Because, biblically speaking, love is not a feeling. Love is a commitment to seek the best for the other person. And the point of this passage is that Jesus' kind of love is more important than anything else. The greatest of these is love for two reasons.

First, because the Bible says that *God is love*. It's interesting, you know, God is also powerful, but the Bible doesn't say God is power. God is all-knowing, but the Bible doesn't say that God is knowledge. The Bible says that God is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What that means is that what God is, is a relationship. God is a relationship. God is a party. God is a relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And Jesus' love is the most important thing there is because that's what God is: love.

The second reason love is the most important thing is because *love is the most powerful thing*. It's because God loves that He created the universe to have more things to love. It was God's love that ignited the Big Bang, and it's the most powerful thing there is. You know, you can't change someone by using power or authority. Like, if I'm bigger than you, I have more authority than you, I can get you to do something, but I can't change

your heart through power and authority. But Jesus' love changes our hearts, which means His love also changes schools and workplaces and neighborhoods one person at a time.

And of course, we know—of course we know—that love is the most important thing. Of course we know that, right? I know that love is the most important thing. You know that love is the most important thing. I know that you know that love is the most important thing. You know that I know that you know that love is the most important thing. We are knowledgeable people. But do we do it? Do we put love ahead of everything else? Love and relationship ahead of our careers, ahead of our politics? Do we do it? Because sometimes I don't.

And this passage challenges us to put love ahead of some things that we really, really like. For starters, love—Jesus' kind of love—is more important than religiosity. The text says, *If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, if I possess to the poor, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

We know from earlier chapters that the Corinthians were bragging about their spiritual gifts. Some of them spoke in tongues, which is a spiritual prayer language. Others had the gift of prophecy. Some could do miracles. A lot of them were doing good things, like caring for the poor. And all of that stuff is great. It's great stuff. It's just not the most important thing. Even good things, even good things done without love can be destructive things.

See, there's a difference between the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit are things like miracles, speaking in tongues, revelation, prophecy. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And you can fake the gifts of the Spirit. You can pretend you're having a prophecy or a revelation, but it's really hard to fake the fruit of the Spirit. I mean, for a little while, you can. For a little while, you can fake being loving and joyful and peaceful and all of that. But eventually, the real us comes out. The fruit of the Spirit is what happens the more we experience Jesus' love.

The second thing that love is more important than is our gifts, skills, jobs, and school. And this would have been very confrontational in Corinth at the time, as it is for us even, because Corinth was filled with the most successful business people, the most successful A-list celebrity people, the most successful academics, right? And Paul says, in God's eyes, it's worthless if you don't have love.

We have some of the most talented people around in this church. I mean, we have lots of talent in this church, and that's a great thing, right? Like, our goal is not to be mediocre, okay? Our mission statement is not, "Bellevue Presbyterian: we just don't want to suck," okay? That's not our mission statement.

It's good to have lots of talented people in this church, but if the foundation isn't love, we're going to mess stuff up.

There's a man in our church I'll call David, who a while back got a promotion that he had really wanted, but in the process, he didn't tell one of his close friends at work that he was even trying for this promotion, because he knew his friend was also trying for it, and he was the competition. So, David didn't tell him. But when David got the job, his friend was hurt that David hadn't valued him enough to tell him that he didn't value the friendship enough to have told him. He was really hurt. To his credit, David apologized for not putting the relationship ahead of the promotion. But that's how easily we do it. That's how easily we can put school, career, or winning on the sports team, or whatever it is, good things, unless we put them above love and relationship. And we know this, but again, it is so easy to forget because the cultural air we breathe says success is the most important thing.

How many of us would turn down a promotion because it might take away too much time from our family? Some of us might, some of you have. But what about if it would take too much time away from friends and community? Would we turn it down for that?

Which brings me to the third thing that love is more important than, and that's knowledge. The text says, "If I can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, but do not have love, I am nothing." Where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Corinth was a highly educated city. Education was one of their false gods that they worshiped, as it is for us, right? And Christians loved to know things. We loved to know Greek verbs and stuff like that—parse this, what's the history of this temple, blah, blah. And that's good stuff. That's good stuff. But even good things without love can be destructive. A few chapters earlier, Paul said, "Knowledge puffs up while love builds up." In this text, he says, "Love does not boast, it is not proud." And the word for love in the original Greek is the same word for "puffed up." It refers to a bellows being pumped up and ready to blow out hot air.

Are there any pumped-up bellows full of hot air in your life? Maybe some of them coming over for Thanksgiving this week? What Paul is getting at is this privileging knowledge above everything else. It would be like, for instance, if I was at a dinner party and someone brought up World War II, and I then spent the next 10 minutes downloading everything I knew about World War II, killing the conversation and relationships happening around the table. It would be like that—totally fictitious, made-up example. Man, you get me on certain topics, and I'll tell you more about penguins than you ever want to know. A pumped-up bellows full of hot air.

One of the smartest people I've ever met was a philosophy professor at USC named Dallas Willard. Some of you have read his books. He died a few years ago. I had the

privilege of meeting him, and he was just brilliant. I would never want to get in an argument with Dallas because I'm afraid he'd prove I don't exist. He was just brilliant.

A man I know was in one of his classes, and one day there was this student in the class arguing with Dallas, telling him he was wrong on a number of issues and doing it in a really puffed-up, look-at-how-smart-I-am kind of a way. But instead of arguing, Dallas just said, "Well, that's probably a good place to end our discussion. Why don't we just leave it here for today and end class here?" After class, this man went up to Dallas and said, "That student was so wrong, everyone knew it. Everyone knew that student was off base. Why didn't you make intellectual jello out of him?"

And Dallas said, "I'm practicing the discipline of not having to have the last word." Now later, Dallas did talk to the student one on one to correct him for the student's sake, so he could pass the test. But he didn't dress him down publicly. Maybe there are situations where addressing it publicly would have been the right thing to do, but either way, the motive still should be love. In an academic environment where intellectual superiority is the false god everyone worships, Dallas was marked by Jesus' love and chose relationship and love ahead of being right or showing how smart he is.

Which brings me to the last point: Love is more important than being right. This passage says love does not insist on its own way, doesn't insist on being right in an argument. This is a great reminder, especially as we head into Thanksgiving, where there may be some relatives or people at our table we don't agree with politically. Will we be able to put love and relationship ahead of being right in a political argument this Thanksgiving?

Now, the things we face as a country are really important and critical issues. So I'm not saying ignore politics altogether, but instead of arguing to be right, or instead of just agreeing not to talk about politics—which is probably better than trashing relationships over it—agreeing not to talk about it would be better still. Even better than that would be to be curious and ask folks, "What experiences have led you to believe the things you do?" I've said this before—just get curious, right?

And I've said this before, so why do I feel the need to say it again? Oh, I know, because we're not doing it. Including me. Just last week, I got in a political discussion with a relative of mine, and I felt this white-hot urgency to show this relative of mine how much better informed I was, how better read I was, and how very, very right I was. Then, as I was driving home, I remembered I had to write this sermon. And I thought, "Why do I keep making myself my own sermon illustrations?"

Be curious—not to agree, because you won't—but to understand. Understanding creates connection and relationship. And it's not just in politics. It's all of life. I heard one of our elders this week talk about how God is teaching him that love and relationships are more important than anything else. So, he said, "These days, instead of saying to my wife, 'What is it this time?' which FYI does not count as compassionate listening, I instead say, 'What do we actually want? And how do we get better at getting there?'"

He's prioritizing relationship above getting what he wants, being right in an argument, or "defending his rights." You know, as I will often say in marriage counseling, usually to the guy—he'll be arguing, and in marriage counseling, the guy will often look at me and say, "Pastor, I'm right, right? Tell her I'm right." And I'm like, "Dude, you can be married or you can be right. You pick."

Love is more important than religiosity, gifts, skills, school, job, knowledge, and being right. And as we've said throughout this series, the way we become more loving is to experience Jesus' love more and more ourselves. Because before love is something you do, it has to be a person you've met. Because we can't give what we don't have.

This passage is not so much a list of things you have to go do as it is a list of ways that Jesus loves you. Jesus is patient with you. Jesus is kind to you. Jesus keeps no record of your wrongs. Jesus protects you. Jesus defends you. Jesus' love for you will never, ever end. It is a description of how Jesus loves you. And the more we experience that love, the more loving we become. It changes us.

So, have you received his love?

Last time, action steps, the same ones as the last couple of weeks, the same two that we've given you the last couple of weeks. Action steps:

First, experience Jesus' love through 1 Corinthians 13. Read this passage and ask God to show you how he has loved you like this.

Second, those stickers that we ask you to fill out and put on the windows leading into the sanctuary—fill out those stickers. The name of someone who is difficult for you to love, who through the power of prayer and Jesus—because we can't do it on our own, we need Jesus' love to do it—through the power of prayer and Jesus, you are loving this difficult person. Keep doing that, or start doing it this week if you haven't done it.

This week, as I was walking to my office through the lobby, I noticed how many stickers are on those windows, and I thought, "Wow, that's a lot of difficult people." I hope my name is not on that window somewhere. But I also thought, "Wow, that's a lot of people experiencing Jesus' love through us as a church."

A long time ago, way back during my first year as a college pastor, I hated conflict and avoided it at all costs. Now, ever since I came here to lead this church, I've gotten better at engaging conflict well because there have been so many opportunities to practice. Thank you so much for that wonderful gift that you have given to me. But back then, I avoided conflict because I wanted people to like me. I didn't want to get in conflict with them because then they wouldn't like me.

Well, that year, we took the students in our ministry on a ski trip retreat to Lake Tahoe. And on the first night of this trip, a group of senior guys left and went to Reno to go to the

casinos. So, they were over 21 and all that, but still they went to Reno to the casinos. I had no plans to confront them on this when they got back because I didn't like conflict, and I wanted these guys to like me. But also because the ministry I inherited was very small, and there was pressure on me to make it grow. And these guys were super cool guys. They were bringing a bunch of friends to my ministry. So, because of them, my ministry was growing. So, I felt I needed them to be successful in my career. I didn't want to alienate them. Plus, they didn't do anything illegal, right?

They were 21, they went to the casinos, but they didn't get drunk. They didn't do a bunch of gambling. So it was fairly innocent, and I didn't want to be that uptight, Christiany pastor nagging at them, right? So my plan was to say nothing to them.

Until my wife, God bless her, said, "You know, nothing good follows the phrase 'you know.' You know, other students look up to these guys, and they set a really bad example for the other students. And this retreat is about community, and they weren't here tonight to be in community with these students. So you need to confront them."

And I said, "No, I don't."

And she said, "Yeah, you do. And not just because they're setting a bad example for the other students, but because this isn't good for them. Jesus is calling them to be leaders, and they're not doing it. And you're supposed to show them how to be the men that God is calling them to be. That's your job. So you need to get over your fear of conflict, and your fear that you're going to alienate them, and then your ministry won't grow, and you'll be a terrible failure living in a cardboard shack in Pasco, or whatever else is going on in your head. You need to get over it, and do what God is calling you to do."

And I was like, "Oh, okay, you're right, but you can be right, or you can be married."

I didn't say that. I did not say that. She was right.

So when they got back, I, in love, but clearly said, "Look, you guys are leaders, and this set a bad example for the other students. Jesus is calling you to be here, to make relationships with these younger students, be the mentors and the role models they need. You could change their lives. That's who Jesus is calling you to be, and I know you've got it in you to do that."

And they were actually pretty defensive. It did not go well. It was very uncomfortable. But for the rest of the weekend, they were great examples. They stepped into who Jesus was calling them to be, and they did not leave my ministry. And as time went on, they were actually glad that I said something to them because it made them feel loved. They realized I loved them so much, I was able to get over my discomfort with conflict to help them grow.

I was focused on being liked and career success. But if I had built a 3,000-student ministry, but did not love them enough to help them grow, then it would have been meaningless. It would have been pointless. I would have been a noisy gong, a clanging symbol, if I had not loved them enough to seek their best.

Love is more important than my comfort. Love is more important than my career success. Love is more important than getting everyone around me to like me and approve of me, because love is more powerful than power. Love is more knowledgeable than knowledge. Love is wiser than wisdom, and love is more successful than success.

The most important characteristic of a follower of Jesus is to be marked by his love. Jesus, who when we had sinned and gone our own way, would have been right, would have been perfectly within his rights to argue with us and condemn us, but instead laid aside every right he had as God and came himself in the person of Jesus, born into poverty, died on a cross so that we could be reconciled to God and so that we could become like him. That was not what was rightly due him, but it is what he chose, because he loves you and because he loves me.

And we, his followers, are called to be marked by his love. Because you see, what good, what possible good does it do us to be right or within our rights, but not be loving? What good, what possible eternal good does it do for us to get into Harvard or have our kids get into Harvard or get the promotion or coach the winning soccer team or whatever it is— all good stuff, but without love, it's all meaningless.

Love that protects, love that defends, love that is brave, love that seeks the best for the other person even if it costs us something. Love that hopes all things, endures all things, believes all things, love that never ends. Faith, hope, love. Abide these three. But the greatest of these is love.

Jesus, you are the author of love. So Lord, help us to stand in your love. Help us to be filled with your love. We can't do this on our own. We can't become these people just by willpower. So Jesus, supernaturally, spiritually, even as we go into Thanksgiving, remind us of all the ways you've loved us. Help us to experience it in ways that shape us, change our hearts so that we are marked by your love. So that a world that does not know you will know how much they are loved by you.

In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- As we read through the same passage again this week, are there different things that stand out for you?
- What do we learn about God and what do we learn about people as we reflect on this passage?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Of all the attributes of love listed in 1 Corinthians 13, which one do you think Jesus has shown toward you the most?
- Which of these attributes do you most need to love the people who are hard for you to love?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.