

## January 24

Sermon: This Isn't Love

Scripture: I Corinthians 13

One of the critical topics for all Christians is Love. Jesus, in his ministry, his life and ultimately in his death shared with us a message of God's love for each of us. Paul and the other early church writers continually come back to this theme. They understand that without love, as Paul writes, anything we do really is of no account.

Paul realized that many things masquerade under the title of love. In fact, the Greeks had four words for love. There was eros" from which we get erotic and was talking about sexual love. There was "storge" which describes the love parents have for their children. There was "philia" which describes the affection between friends. And then there was "agape." Agape love has the idea of a person giving all his or her love to another. In the New Testament it is used to say that God gives each of us, God's children, all of God's love and we are asked to give back to God that same total commitment of love. Agape is used 249 times in the New Testament while eros and storge not at all. Everything we do is to be weighed in the balance of, is it loving, but only a certain type of loving, best described as "agape" love. Paul, the practical theologian, understands that this leaves too much in the realm of theory so he goes about, in this 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Corinthians, laying out practical guidelines for helping us know when what we are doing is loving and just as importantly when our actions are not loving, no matter what our intentions. I am going to spend two weeks on these practical aspects of Christian Love. We will begin with the negatives. Paul lists eight things that are not loving. Because many of them masquerade, at least in part, as being lovable acts it is a reminder to be on our guard and really evaluate what we are doing. We need to understand that when these actions enter into our activities and thoughts, even a little, we are not being loving as God wants us to be. Paul would remind us that this means then that these types of actions now account for nothing. That is a challenging thought, isn't it?

And, just to make it clear. When Paul talks about love he is talking about the hard working love of a person for God and for each other. It has nothing to do with emotion or passion. This is not a love that you fall into or out of. It is a set of deliberate actions that we do because we love God and love others in ways that God demands.

So what are the eight actions that we need to eliminate from our lives if we are truly to share the “agape” type of love with all?

This love is not **envious**. I thought about why this would top Paul’s list. Then I realized that envy is also found in the Ten Commandments where we are told not to covet or we could say be envious of our neighbor’s stuff. So envy is an eternal problem. Beyond another’s stuff there are so many other things we can envy, a person’s popularity, financial status, job and the list goes on. When we become envious we no longer are able to celebrate what is happening in that person’s life. We become resentful. Some translations use the term jealous instead. When we find that little green monster raising its head, and we look at people with criticism instead of support for what they have, then we realize we are not acting loving towards them.

**Boastful** is the second one on his list. It fits right beside the next one which is **Arrogant**. When we are stuck on our accomplishments, when we think we need to come first or our opinion is the only one that matters, we are not being particularly loving, are we? All of us have had to sit through those trying conversations where someone is only focused on what is happening in their life, their achievements. No matter what you say it always comes back to them. And whatever comes out of their mouths is to be taken as truth for they are never wrong. Do you feel warm and fuzzy feelings towards that individual? No. Do you have to work really hard to be loving towards them? Yes. So then don’t make your words and attitudes someone else’s challenge in how to be loving to you!

**Rude** is the next one on our list and this is one that all of us have pop up in our interactions with others. There are two kinds of rude behavior. One of these is what I would call unintentional rudeness. We are busy or our minds are full of details about something and we are unintentionally rude to friends and acquaintances. We don’t stop

to listen; we brush off their concerns and hurt their feelings. All of us have done this. Later, we often realize our mistake before the other even mentions it and we offer an apology. I think the kind of rudeness Paul is talking about, however, are those times when you are deliberately rude to a person. You are upset with them for some reason and you give them the cold shoulder. You feel justified because you have been hurt and you want them to know it. You are angry and it comes out in unpleasant ways. Paul would remind us that no matter how much you have been hurt, how much you want to justify your actions or reactions, when you are rude you are not being loving and that is not of God.

***Love does not insist on its own way*** is next on Paul's list. We have all known those people who are never wrong. They can always justify their actions as being correct. When they have an idea they expect others to embrace it for, after all, they have thought it through and it is the best. When we insist on our way we are not very loving. As a pastor I am afraid to admit how many times I have had the conversation with someone, "If we don't do this then I am leaving the church." Acquiescence to their plan or idea is the litmus test of friendship. Yet it is hard to not insist when you know yours is the best, the brightest idea. I have a friend who teaches classes in leading focus groups for the conference. He reminds us that the body is wise. Given enough time a good idea will be heard and responded to. You don't have to insist for its merit to be appreciated. But insisting often means that something less than the best is accepted to keep the peace. This is not loving.

It is not ***irritable***. How about grumpy or out of sorts? Do we get a pass on these? For all of us have those times when we are tired, or sick and we are not fun to be around. I am guessing that Paul is not talking so much about these normally occurring times as those moments when we go into a conversation spoiling for a fight. We look for reasons to be upset. We take offense at everything. We are upset and we want the world to know about it. This kind of irritability we have control over and Paul says that when you are feeling this way it is better to sit down, shut up, or stay home. When you go looking for a fight you are not acting lovingly.

We are almost done. Love is not **resentful**. One of the things I tell people continually is that they can't fix the past. It is better to forgive, forget and move on. Carrying that past baggage spoils the present and any opportunities for growth or healing. Often when we get upset we bring up all the past as if it is completely relevant to today. Some of it might be, but mostly it is about past things that we have not let go of. We talk about a God who loves us unconditionally and forgives us. This also means that God in the forgiving does not rehash past events with us! That is what agape love is all about. It is what we should strive for as well.

Finally, it **does not rejoice in wrong doing**. Celebrating the good in each person is what we should be doing. We realize, that and when we are secretly glad that something bad has happened to someone we don't like or we are envious that someone got away with something, we are not acting our best towards others or God.

Wow, what a list. There is enough of a challenge in this to make us feel discouraged and hopeless. Paul stresses also the positive ways we can act loving each and every day. This is what we will focus on next week. But for now this is a reminder that we all have to continually evaluate our actions and reactions and ask, "Are we living and relating to others and to God in the best we can?" Are we living "Agape" love or are we just a clanging gong, making a lot of noise but not doing much good. It is something to think about often, ask forgiveness for when we have failed, and strive always to do better today than we did yesterday.