

## January 31

Sermon: This is Love

Scripture: I Corinthians 13

After last week's challenging sermon reminding us of all the ways we are not loving in our actions towards others we need something more uplifting. Paul realized that, as well, when he wrote this masterful piece of prose. After telling us of eight things we can never do and claim to be loving, today we have a list of actions that we are called to do. Some are surprising but necessary if we are to truly be the people God calls us to be. That is, to be loving children of God, following the example of Jesus. Some on this list ask us to act in specific ways. Others are reminders of how God is in our lives asking us to trust.

Love is ***Patient***, Paul begins. What does that statement mean for you? I am guessing if I asked I would get a lot of different answers. For me I hear it saying God loves me enough to let me work out things on my own. Now this might not sound loving because sometimes I make some pretty poor choices. We all do. But if we were always rescued we would not grow. In making decisions and living with their consequences I have matured the most in my life. Remember that poster, "Have patience, God isn't finished with me?" We are a work in progress and God is patient in working with us. We need to extend that same grace to others. Sometimes we want to rush in and rescue people, particularly children or grandchildren, from their decision. To be patient is hard, but it is often loving. When we are dealing with others and feel impatient because they are not doing it right, or soon enough, or whatever, we need to remember last week's sermon. This impatience is right on the cusp of becoming irritable or resentful. Take a deep breath, be patient, give them some space. We want it, expect it, from God and we are challenged to give the same to others.

Love is ***Kind***. This should go without saying, yet I have witnessed and experienced many an unkind word or act by people who proclaim to be followers of Christ. They justify their actions but it is ultimately unacceptable. We are to strive to always act kindly and with compassion. This is one of those actions that we can practice

on a daily basis. We can challenge ourselves to be kind today. We can evaluate all of our interactions at the close of a day and see if we get an “exceeds expectations” or a “needs improvement” grade on our daily report card. It is hardest to be kind with those we love the most because it is with them we let our guard down. It is also easy to be unkind to those we have casual interactions with like people at restaurants or clerks in stores. We are challenged in all places and to all people to be kind.

***Happy with the truth*** is the next one on the list. This is tied to last week where we are reminded that love does not rejoice in wrong doing. Yet, it is hard to always be happy with the truth. There are those times where truth telling is uncomfortable. I think Paul was challenging us more about being happy when we receive the truth, even when we don't want to hear it. Constructive criticism is hard to take. No one likes to be told when they are doing something wrong. Yet if we embrace what we hear instead of rejecting it, we will grow. This rejoicing in the truth goes even further. All of us make up our minds about things. I can list a few hot button topics circulating right now such as global warming, immigration, Isis, the school bond levy and political parties. You have made up your mind about all of these. What would happen if you hear something different than your pre-determined notions? Something that would make you rethink your position and change. Would you be happy with that information or would you ignore it and pretend you didn't hear? Being happy with the truth is hard because it is challenging. It also helps us to see people in the best possible light because we are no longer letting our filters get in the way.

We now come to the “all things” list. Paul is trying to emphasize love's all-encompassing scope. It is truly “agape” love. The first of these states that love: ***Puts up with all things***. Much of what we are called to do is to handle, with love and grace, difficult times. Just think about our personal relationships. If you are married and have children, think about all that you have had to put up with. You endured sleepless nights early on. Later you had the rebellion of teenage years, the dreaded times of sickness, and the worries as children took flight and left home. Then it began all over again with grandchildren! With spouses you have endured spats, sickness, and some of you have walked that lonely path of loss. None of us are agreeing to bear all of these difficulties

when we enter into a relationship but as they come along we do handle them because we love the person and hopefully we do it with grace. Our personal experiences are a reminder that the call to love another, in the name of Christ, comes with some costs and we are to bear them with love. Now this does not mean another can take advantage of you or abuse you and you are required to take it. But it does mean that when it becomes challenging to be around another for whatever the reason, instead of acting in one of those unloving ways we mentioned last week, we are to bear this moment in grace knowing it will pass.

***Trusts in all things*** is next on the list. This means, for me, that we have to put the cynicism aside and believe the best in people. Does it mean we will be taken advantage of? Yes, at times. But we are told it is worth the risk. Ultimately this is a reminder to place our trust in God and in the teachings of Christ. When it becomes hard to believe or act, we need to trust and do it. Is it hard to forgive? We need to trust that this is what is best, for it is what Jesus wants us to do. Is it hard to believe in the goodness of God when something really terrible is happening to us or a loved one? We are to trust that God is with us and we will get through it. This gives us the strength and grace to survive. So, trust in God is a deliberate action of love.

***Hopes for all things.*** What does hope have to do with love? That was the question I pondered as I looked at this assertion. I began to realize how many hopes I have for family, friends, community, and our world. I hope for peace. I hope for a kind and loving community. I hope that when family or friends are going through tough times that the testing time is short and that they feel God's presence. I am sure that is part of what Paul was mentioning. But I think there is even more. It is one thing to hope, it is another to be an agent in making that hope a possibility. Yes, we know things are ultimately in God's hands but there are things we can do to be peacemakers, to help our community to be kinder, and to be among those who help ease the burdens when those we care about are having a tough time. This is part of "agape" love. It means we are never discouraged because we trust in God and hope that the Godly vision for our lives and the world will happen, but it also means doing our part.

**Endures all things.** This is a hard one for me. I want more than a promise that I can endure. I want things to be better, to be different. Yet, sadly sometimes that is not going to happen. We all have had to walk that lonely valley of death dealing with our grief. Yes, time heals some of the hurt but the hole in the fabric of our lives will always be there. We might wish it not, but we learn to endure and, in the love of others, find life is good. The same goes for sickness, in our own lives or others. Sometimes a pill or an operation isn't going to fix things. We have to endure or walk beside someone enduring. Again, we find that when we are surrounded by love, it is easier to shoulder this burden. So, for me, I would rewrite this passage and say, Love makes the burdens of life easier to carry. I know this to be true for I see those who try to deal with the issues of grief and loss, of pain and sickness, on their own. They might manage but it beats them down while others endure, yes, but often actually grow in faith and hope in the journey because of love.

**Love Never fails** is how Paul ends his list. We know God's love is a constant in our lives. The Psalmist shared this when he said, "Though I descend to the lowest depth of Sheol, thou art there." It was a reminder that you never sink so low that God isn't there to catch us. We rely upon that love during the most difficult times in our lives and it is that love that will be the bridge that helps us transit from this life to the next. If God's love never fails what does that say about us? Paul, I believe, was challenging his listeners to be faithful in their love. The entire list of what it means to not love and to love was given to help us to understand what agape love from God is like and how we are to live. Paul calls love the greatest and most perfect gift of the spirit. As followers of Christ we are to share that love intentionally and continually. When we fail we know God will pick up the pieces. We ask for forgiveness and try harder tomorrow.

So, we hear the challenge before us. It is one that we will never be able to put a check mark beside, saying we have done it so well there is nothing left to do. It is a daily challenge. But as we listen to Paul's words and act in certain ways and refrain from acting in others we will grow in love, we will receive God's love more abundantly and we will begin to see God more clearly as others will see God through us. This is what Jesus wants from us and is the task of all Christians.