

Sermon Study  
Love's Gold Standard  
1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

*And now I will show you the most excellent way.*

*13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

*4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

*8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

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

- This text actually is a response to some serious problems in the Corinthian Church. The people were not treating each other in loving fashion and their church was suffering as a result. St. Paul takes them to task for this and then encourages them to follow the law of love.

Show of hands: How many of us here today who have heard this exact-same text read at a wedding? So you've noticed it's popular too! Almost without fail, in the course of premarital instruction, bride and groom to be will choose this as one of the texts for their wedding. They can't help it. It talks so much about love that it seems so very perfect for the romantic mood they are seeking to create on their wedding day.

- How about in your group? How many have heard this text in a wedding? But let's take it one step farther. Anyone here choose this text for their wedding? (Ask the men they'll surely remember every detail...snicker) Seriously don't be shy, if you did have it in your wedding. it's a great text. As we shall see.

But I'm guessing they don't realize what they are really buying into. For this text is as far away from "romantic" love as one can possibly get; it is one of most strict and unwavering applications of the God's law that there is. It is here that Paul expresses what he calls "the most excellent way". It's really the Gold Standard for love.

- A brief definition of Law and Gospel: Law shows us our sin and tells us what we are to do. The Gospel (or good news) shows us what God has done for our salvation in Christ Jesus. Read verses 4 through 8 above once more. Ask, "Does this show us our sin?" "Does this show us what we are to do?" If yes, then law. One other test is to ask how does this make me feel. The Law will always make you feel like your under the gun. The Gospel will comfort. This section on how to love exposes our inadequacies and is therefore law. One of the reasons I try to encourage married couples not to pick this text for a wedding is because it will expose their inadequacies and the wedding day is not necessarily the best time for that! Read on:

Imagine if I preached this at a wedding in the way that it deserved to be preached. Imagine with me for a moment what that would be like:

Love is patient: have you been patient with this other person that you are about to marry, will you always be patient with this other person, if your answer is no, you have not loved.

Feeling the burn yet? Let's continue

Love is not self-seeking: Why are you marrying this person today? Are you doing this because the other person looks good, you like them and you are planning to get something out of your connection with them. If so, you have not loved. For that is self-seeking and love is not self-seeking.

Had enough? Or are you thirsty for more? one more:

Love keeps no record of wrongs: So you have completely forgotten everything that the person whom you are marrying has done that might hurt you? If you haven't, you have kept a record of wrongs and you are not currently loving that person. For love keeps no record of wrongs.

- Wouldn't that just hammer the bride and groom into oblivion! On their wedding day, I could demonstrate to them and everyone present that they don't really come close to Love. Obviously I don't. This text is actually a much better one for those who have been married for some time. The stars in their eyes have cleared and they have begun to look at the person they have married in an objective fashion. They also are beginning to see that the person they married is not perfect. Do you remember when this reality hit you? (BE CAREFUL HERE) What was it like? How did you punch through it? (I use the term "punch" metaphorically of course).

That's enough I suppose. Do you see what I mean? Powerful law. This Love that Paul talks has nothing to do with all those romantic feelings that people wish to foster in their weddings. Real love is not about feelings, but rather its about duty towards another person. Your duty regardless of what you get out of it. Your duty regardless of how the other might make you feel at any given moment.

- WHAT?! Love is not flitting/floating happy FEELING? This is really hard for people to understand at first because our culture is constantly telling us that love is a just a feeling. But I can cure you of that very easily. You who have small children. Why do you change their diapers regularly? Does it give you a happy feeling? (If it does, get to a pschologist immediately!) Of course it doesn't make you happy or joyful? I could very well disgust you. Regardless of how gross it is, you do it. You know you must do it. Why? Because you love your baby! Or think good Samaritan. He helped the man on the side of the road out love. Did his heart go all a flutter as he looked into the man's face now beaten to a pulp? Did it put a big warm smile on his face? Nope. The guy that was beat up was revolting to look at. But he did look at him; he did take care of him. Love is like that. If it's real it must be independent of expectation for good feelings. Love is more an act of the will. Consider also marriage vows. You take a vow to Love in all circumstances (sickness and health...etc). How can you take a vow about how your going to feel? Are feelings subject to vows? Nope. The vows we take appeal to WILL. IN our vows we resolve to LOVE...
- Okay, then are feelings wrong? Nope. Good feelings can be a wonderful result of real love. You've noticed how feelings fluctuate I'm sure. In your marriage, what are some things that you have done that might stop the fluctuation? What are some practical things that you have done that can keep a marriage strong?

One fellow that I was reading recently goes so far as to say that marrying someone is really an act of charity. My wife can attest to that! If ever there was an act of charity, this was it. I poke fun at myself, but I actually agree with the guy. To love a fellow sinful human being and pledge your love for life to that same sinful human being, is an act of charity. Love is not self-seeking! It is for the benefit of the other and not ours. Isn't that, the very definition of charity? To do something for another and not yourself.

Furthermore, to love someone means that we will not grow impatient; that we will not be easily angered; that we will not keep a record of wrongs; that we will protect and trust them; that we will hope for and with them. Is this not behaving charitably towards another? And we pledge to do it for a lifetime! It could be argued that getting married is the most charitable thing we will ever do. Nothing else that we do requires such a commitment. It's life-long and involves everything about you. It's not as easy as spending a Saturday at a local soup kitchen...It's constant and life long.

This is love. Very difficult. None of us do it perfectly. We spend our lives just barely clinging to a scrap of it and trying to improve upon it. And because we are so stricken by our own sinful nature, progress in love can be very slow at times. But that's the thing. That's the point of the marriage vows. In the vows we actually take a pledge to stick to it. At the heart of every successful marriage is a man and a woman who have each committed themselves to the effort of love.

- **Why is it correct to refer to love as an effort? Go into this a bit (again be careful not to offend your spouse! Perhaps talking about yourself is safer.). Think to yourself (share if you wish) how you might put more effort into your marriage. What sort of things could be done?**

Marriage fails when they refuse to try. They ruin their relationship with their spouse because they do the opposite of what Paul says: they are impatient, easily angered, and they keep a record of wrongs; they don't protect, they don't hope and they trust. They are totally self-seeking. Whining about how they didn't get what they deserve. "Boo Hoo!" "Poor Me!" They got no clue. They refuse to look past themselves. They refuse to behave charitably.

Is there any help? With as much as a third of the marriages in this country failing and the most successful practitioners of marriage still struggling to figure it out, we obviously could use some pretty serious help in matters of love. And help is exactly what we have in our Lord. 1 John 4:19 says "We love because he first loved us." Now if ever there was a fitting passage for a marriage ceremony, this is it! It's not just law, but has grace as well. And we're going to need a lot of grace if ever we are going to make it in love.

"We love because he first loved us." That means that what love we can produce is a direct result of his love in our lives. And his love cannot be denied. It is expressed most clearly in Jesus, His Son. If you go through 1 Cor. 13 and replace the word love with the word Jesus, you'll see what I mean. Check this out, it's very cool:

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. Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Jesus never fails.

See? Jesus is the very embodiment of love and he has come into your life! He came for the purpose of giving you his all. There was nothing especially attractive or charming about you that caused him to do this for you. Nope. He knew what you were about; knew what was in your heart; knew you as a poor, pitiful sinner who needed a big hand up. He had compassion on you. He gave up his life on the cross so that you could rise to a new life. Your salvation is not something that you have earned or even deserved, it was a complete act of charity done for you by Jesus. And as first John says, "we love, because he first loved us." Since he has been charitable to you, you can now afford to be charitable to others.

- **It's kind of like stewardship. We give because he first gives to us. A lot of times people who have an inability to love are clueless as to how much God actually loves them and what great sins God has had to get past. God's loved us "while we were yet sinners" (Romans 5:8) I believe that once we fully realize what lengths God has gone to save our infernal hides and redeem us through his Son we would be like**

scrooge on Christmas day. We'd realize how amazingly good we've got it and how good we should be towards others.

Are you struggling in love? Welcome to the club. And now that you've admitted it maybe you can admit it to Jesus. He can help you know. Ask him to give you an extra measure of his Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit can really help you to see clearly and cut through the clutter in your brain and help you stop kidding yourself. If your grouching over your marriage, ask yourself, with the spirit's help, why this is so. Are you grumbling because the other person is not giving you what you think they should? That sounds kind of self-seeking to me. That's a failure to love. Have you been rude too? Are you proud? Have you been keeping a record of wrong? Have you failed to be charitable towards the other?

I suggest you take the bulletin insert home with you and read Paul's Gold standard (1Cor. 12:31-13:12) and use it to diagnose yourself. (Yourself and not your spouse....if you take this home and use it to hammer your spouse, you've not heard a word that was said today) Read it and honestly ask, is that me or not? Confess your failures to Jesus today.

Jesus took a vow too you know.... A vow to give his all for the love of you. He has not backed away from that. He's still giving you 100%. He will forgive your sin and by his spirit he will give you strength to keep your vow to love. We love because he loved us. AMEN

- "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Heb 4:12). This is a description of what's going on when someone really comes on line with the word of God. It can really help! It can help in learning how to love.