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Epiphany 4 – January 30, 2022

“Extreme Love”

Read 1 Corinthians 13: 1 - 13/ Memorize 1 Cor. 13:13

With a title like “Extreme Love,” I hope you figured out I can’t be talking about romantic love. Although, romantic love can be extreme, at times. When you’re in the throes of it, you can be extremely in love. Unfortunately, just as quickly, you can be extremely out of love. That’s not the love that Paul was talking about.

1 Corinthians 13 is often called the love chapter. You’ve probably heard it at a wedding. However, there was no wedding in sight when Paul wrote to them. His letter was a call to a congregation in conflict to return to the most important teaching of Jesus, to love one another. You might want to actually call this radical love. Love that gets at the root of being a Christian.

There are times when I’ve heard a person talk about how good a Christian they are. It makes me a bit uncomfortable. I wonder what they mean by that. Here’s the deal: you can be more Christian than Jesus Himself, but if you’re not committed to living a life of love, you’ve missed the whole message of the Gospel He brought to us.

Now, before you get too outraged by that, think about it. Jesus came to bring the love of God to us so that we could show that love to others. Doesn’t He say exactly that when He says, first love God, then love your neighbor. So often there is a confusion between living like Christ and being good. The two are not the same.

Even as Paul begins this chapter, he’s making that very obvious. Listen again to those first few verses “If I speak in the tongues of angels, but do not have love, I’m only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol.”

Think about this. Corinth was in Greece, where the spoken word was prized. About 400 years before Paul, there was this guy named Aristotle who wrote a

work called *Rhetoric*. *Rhetoric* spelled out the rules for public speaking that are still being studied by students of public speaking today.

The Corinthians valued eloquence of speech. When Paul begins by saying it is wonderful to be a fine speaker, to “speak in the tongues of men or of angels ...” but then goes on to say that if your heart is not filled with love, your eloquent speech sounds like “a resounding gong or clanging cymbal” he got their attention, which is exactly what he wanted to do.

Many scholars tell us that outside of many pagan temples were gongs or big cymbals. They were there so that, as people walked in, they could bang them to wake up the gods. So Paul is saying that if things are done without love it’s as futile as striking a gong or cymbals to awaken a pagan idol.

Paul goes on, “If I have the gift of prophesy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” Whoa! Is Paul placing love over faith? How could that be? This is revolutionary. That’s what leads me to say that this is about radical love.

Think about people in our society who call themselves followers of Jesus yet, in the same breath, will tell you that they hate Muslims, Jews, Democrats, Republicans and, even other Christians, because they don’t believe exactly as they believe. An atrocity, done in the name of Jesus, is still an atrocity.

Now you may say, “Pastor, you’ve gone too far. Love can’t be more important than faith.” Don’t look at me. Look at the very last verse of this chapter that Paul was inspired to write by God: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” Take it up with God when you get to heaven, if you want?

What’s Paul saying to us? Faith, hope and love are all important. Here’s what’s you want to remember: Love is faith put into action, which also produces hope. How you live and why you live that way, is as important as what you believe. We can rejoice in the good news that we are saved by grace because sometimes, our love falls short, especially for the stranger. Neither faith nor works alone will be able to do the job. We are saved by God’s extreme love, His grace, a love that God intends for us to pass on to others.

Even great generosity is challenged. "If I give all I possess to the poor..." Anybody remember or guess the next words? "But have not love, I gain nothing." Paul is expounding the teachings of Jesus. Here's the application: Without love, being generous can easily become manipulation, not grace-filled generosity.

A good Pharisee had to be committed to keeping over 600 commandments. Jesus confronts them about that by saying that they lay a burden on people without helping them. Jesus then says it's as simple of this in John 13: 34 - 35: "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."

Did you catch that? Jesus, who loved and gave His life for all, makes it clear that the central teaching of faith is to love God and others. It's fine to memorize verses, get perfect attendance at church and Sunday school, and give a million dollars. These are all wonderful acts of devotion, but without love, they are meaningless.

Bill Wilson was a pastor in an inner city church in New York City. His mission field is a very violent place. He himself has been stabbed twice as he ministered to the people of the community. A Puerto Rican woman became involved in the church and was led to Jesus. After her conversion she came to Pastor Wilson and said, through an interpreter, "I want to do something to help with the church's ministry."

Wilson asked her what her talents were and she could think of nothing. She didn't even speak English, but she did love children. So he put her on one of the buses that transported kids to church. She would serve religiously, every week. She would always look for the children who looked like they needed the most attention. She would put them on her lap and whisper over and over the words she had learned in English: "I love you. Jesus loves you."

Six months into her ministry, she became attached to a little boy. He never said a word to her. He would get picked up every week for Sunday School with his sister and sit on the woman's lap. Every week, all the way to Sunday School and all the way home, she would tell him, "I love you and Jesus loves you."

One day, to her amazement, the little boy turned around and stammered, "I I I love you, too!" Then he put his arms around her and gave her a big hug. She said

goodbye to him at 2:30 on that Sunday afternoon. At 6:30 that night he was found dead. His mother had beaten him to death and thrown his body in the trash.

We don't know if the last kind words he had ever heard were from this loving woman on the bus. But let's remember this, when that woman, who could barely speak English said to the little boy, "I love you. Jesus loves you," she was fulfilling all the law and the prophets. She was being an authentic witness to him of the love of Jesus. Love is the goal of the every Christian. God wants us to be proactive in our love not just reactive, seeking out people to love.

How will people know that we are followers of Jesus? It's really very simple: by our love. These three still remain, faith, hope and love but we know what the greatest is: love! May our faith in Jesus always be transformed into action for Jesus towards those we know, those we don't know and those who don't know Him. By doing so, like the lady on the bus, we are fulfilling the law and the prophets. More importantly, we will be revealing the glory of God and His love for all.