

## Session 2

July 31, 2022

### WHAT DOES LOVE LOOK LIKE?

#### 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

First Corinthians 13 is one of the most beautiful, moving, and poetic texts found in God's word. The theme is love, and while the passage rests smack in the middle of the Bible's most intense discussion of spiritual gifts, the applications outside that context are almost endless. The key word used is the Greek *agape*, that selfless, sacrificial love that is both an essential attribute of God's being and the characteristic most desired of His church. In the context of 1 Corinthians 13, *agape* is not presented as a spiritual gift, but rather a gift from God that is to permeate the believer, the local church, and the church universal. Love *regulates*; it keeps the church on an even keel. Love *mediates*; it is the standard that keeps people equal and accountable across the kingdom. Love *demonstrates*; it is the singular indication to the world of Christ's salvation.

**Love is necessary (vv. 1-3).** The final verse of chapter 12 promises to introduce "a more excellent way" than selfishly promoting oneself through the miraculous gifts. Here, love is clearly differentiated from the spiritual gifts. They are to be *practiced* in the church, but love is to *permeate* the church. So important is this attribute, that apart from love, even the most eloquent speech is nothing more than an annoying noise (v. 1). Apart from love, the most applauded gifts of prophecy, or knowledge, or faith, as valuable as they are, lose all significance (v. 2). Apart from love, the most seemingly sacrificial services to others or even to God, accomplish nothing (v. 3). Hence, all those tangible accomplishments for the church and kingdom are really only empty works if they are not done both *with* love and *out of* love. For reflection: *Some have said that love is a virtue. How would you define a virtue? How are virtues and spiritual gifts alike? How are they different?*

**Love is unique (vv. 4-7).** This section describes the uniqueness of *agape*. Even the casual reader is struck by the construction of the passage. The characteristics taken individually are simple enough. But in its whole, one can see Paul attempting to describe the indescribable. There are three key divisions in this set of verses. First, Paul describes *what love is* (v. 4). *Patient* is often rendered *long-suffering*. It handles stressful and oppressive situations. *Kind* is rich in meaning. It connotes sensitive courtesy, and a certain sweetness. Next, the apostle describes *what love is not* (vv. 5-6). In short, *agape* makes no room for selfishness and never comes across as mean, hurtful, or ugly. Finally, Paul suggests *what love does* (v. 7). "Bears all things" means that love puts up with whatever comes its way. "Believes all things" means that love accepts the truth freely and completely. "Hopes all things" speaks of the positive nature of *agape*; it looks for the good even when things appear hopeless. "Endures all things" seems to apply personally. That is, love enables the believer to endure personal suffering and hardship, whether just or unjust. For reflection: *Why do you think Paul used such a variety of expressions to describe *agape*? Are there any characteristics of love that you can think of that fall outside of his description?*

**Love is permanent (vv. 8-13).** This final segment is full of meaning, but the general theme is the *permanence* of love. Verse 8 reconnects the chapter with the context of spiritual gifts. The spiritual gifts given to the church are important—and necessary—but they are temporary; "they will cease." They will "come to an end." But "love *never* ends." The *perfect* mentioned in verse

10 has been the subject of debate. Some think of it as the second coming of Christ, when the culmination of the age will render the spiritual gifts no longer necessary. Others (myself included), believe it refers to the completion of the New Testament Scriptures, when the “sign gifts” given to authenticate the truth of the gospel would be replaced by a “more sure word of prophecy” (see 2 Peter 1:19). The same word of God would mature believers (v. 11), clarify the plan of God (v. 12), and complete the knowledge of God’s redemptive plan (v. 12). For reflection: *Why do you think Paul paused in his treatment of spiritual gifts to insert this chapter? How do you think the verses about maturity and clarity (vv. 11-12) fit into this discussion?*