

A public service announcement to all the men: two days from now is Valentine's Day. If you haven't ordered flowers or bought a card or set reservations, it might be time to do so as soon as service ends.

Have you ever stopped to wonder how Valentine's Day got started? Why do we focus on romance and love and heart-shaped boxes of chocolate in February? Hundreds and hundreds of years ago, people in the Northern Hemisphere realized that a shift took place in nature in mid-February. Ducks and geese, which fly around in large flocks during the fall and winter, in groups of dozens of hundreds, start to break off from the group, pair up, and begin their mating season. People thought, "Well, look at that! If the waterfowl are pairing up and falling in love, we should, too." They looked at the calendar and realized that on February 14 the church remembered and celebrated St. Valentine, a devout Christian leader who was martyred on February 14 in the year 270. He wasn't a famous matchmaker, and he wasn't known as the patron saint of love or romance—it just so happened that this was the day when he was killed for his faith and it aligned with the mating season of the birds. In the 19th century, when markets realized it could be commercialized and monetized, it became what it is today.

It's an interesting history lesson that I tell you simply in recognition that this is the week, more than any other, that our entire nation stops to focus on love. As it has turned out, accidentally or providently I do not know, we happen to be reading the most famous, iconic chapter on love in the entire Bible. What we are going to see as we dive into God's word today is that love that way God defines it looks a lot different from love the way our world defines it. We are going to see that of everything that matters in the world, love is the most important thing. In 1 Corinthians 13 we learn three invaluable lessons: we learn that without love, religion is worthless; we learn what true love really looks like; and finally, we learn that only love will last forever. Let's dive into God's Word:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

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

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. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 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 the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a 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. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

This is such a beautiful, inspiration, poetic passage. It has nothing to do with sentimentality or sappy romance and everything to do with the practical, tangible, day-in, day-out way we live our lives. We could say so much about love in this passage, but the three major takeaways are clear.

First, without love, religion is worthless.

Paul was writing to people who were very religious, and many of us are very religious as well. Some of you might hear that and say, “Oh no, not me. I’m not religious.” I have a little test we are going to take to see how religious you are. It’s only five questions; this will be fast. Add up every question you answer yes to. You might be religious if:

- You are in church today.
- You own a Bible.
- You own more than one Bible.
- You said a prayer this week.
- You wish you had prayed more this week.

Be honest: how many of you scored five out of five? We have a lot of religious people in here. Now there is nothing wrong with being religious. Paul is not critiquing religion per se. But he does want us to know that the most intense, impassioned, extreme expressions of religion are worth absolutely nothing if love is not what’s driving it all. In the first three verses Paul says you can have the most powerful displays of religious devotion imaginable, but without love, it all amounts to nothing.

Imagine you were so close to God that you learned to speak another language, but not Chinese or Spanish or German or another language spoken by other people. No, you were so close to God you learned to speak the same language as the angels and could speak to God in a heavenly dialect no one else on earth could understand. Now add to that gifts of prophecy and knowledge that are so powerful in your life that anytime you meet anyone, you have almost a psychic connection and can tell them every sin they’ve ever committed, every lie they’ve ever told, every fear that has ever kept them up at night. And it’s not just for people: you know who is going to win the Super Bowl, you know who is going to win the coin toss, you know the final score of the game and who will be chosen MVP. Everyone who has ever met you is like, “We can’t explain it—that person is on another level. They are tapped into directly to heaven.” Now add on to that, that when you pray, mountains move. And I’m not just talking metaphorically speaking, but mountains actually move. The geologist and cartographers were out there, you prayed, and Mount Everest got a little bit taller, Mount Saint Helen started rumbling, the Rocky Mountains shifted several hundred yards to the east. Undeniable stuff. With that in mind, add one more thing: whatever money you have in your bank account, when you learn about someone who is poor and in need, you empty out every last penny you have to your name and give to them. We are talking about the most powerfully spiritual, religious, gifted person to walk the earth since Jesus himself. Paul says all of those things could be true of you, but if you don’t have love, it’s meaningless. He says, “Without love, I am nothing, I gain nothing, I am only a clanging cymbal”—meaning my life makes a lot of noise, but ultimately, it’s empty, it’s not communicating anything of substance.

Now obviously that example is extreme, but let’s normalize it for everyday life. You could read your Bible every single day. You could have perfect attendance at church and life group 52 weeks of the year. You could do a Bible study before church and a prayer meeting after church. You could mentor at-risk kids and work at the food pantry and tell your friends who don’t know Jesus about the gospel. You could give not just a tithe, which is 10% of your income, to the Lord, but you could double that and give 20%. You could do all of those things, but if they aren’t driven by love, it’s not the religion God wants.

This is the beginning of tax season. Everyone who has earned money has to document their income, subtract their deductions, and then send the government what it is owed. I don’t know anyone who loves paying taxes, but we do it because we are supposed to. We do it because we have to. Some people view

God that way: these are the rules, this is what you've asked, so here you go—I'm going to follow the rules and do all the right things. Dot every i. Cross every t. That's not what God wants.

Sometimes it's not rule-following that motivates us but self-promotion. Some people give financially not out of love for God and a desire to thank him, honor him, and advance his kingdom, but in order to buy influence or social esteem. I was at a church this fall where outside the worship center there was literally a plaque on which were engraved the names of those who had given large amounts. Jesus said that giving is worthless. Don't announce your giving with trumpets for all to hear; rather, give in secret, in a way that doesn't draw any attention to yourself That's what love looks like. Some people have the desire to preach, but it's not driven by a love for God or a love for people; it's driven by a narcissistic tendency to always be the person whose voice is heard the most. Some people have the desire to lead as an elder, but it's not driven by love for God or love for people; it's because they think they are the smartest person in the room and want people to do it their way, or they are power hungry and want to be in control. Some people have the desire to show compassion and mercy to others in need, but it's not driven by love for God and love for people; they are just deeply codependent and get their validation and self-worth by others constantly needing them.

In Matthew 7, Jesus said that on the last day there will be countless people who will stand before him and say, "Lord, Lord, in your name we prophesied, we cast out demons, we performed countless miracles." And Jesus will say, "I never knew you." What God really wants from us is not a litany of good deeds, but a life of love. And honestly, that is what the world we are living in is looking for as well. Our friends, family members, co-workers, and neighbors, if they know we are Christians, and they see us doing religious things but don't see love in our lives, it actively keeps them further away from faith in Christ. But if they see a quality, depth, selflessness, and consistency to our love, it has the power to be a part of what draws them to Christ. Without love, religion is worthless.

The second lesson we learn in this passage is what true love really looks like. In our day love has become such a ubiquitous word that its meaning has become diluted and watered down. We love football on Sundays and queso with our chips, we love our dog, we love our mom, we love Jesus. Love has become such a generic term. The ancient Greeks had four different words for love: "philia," love between friends; "storge," love between your family members; "eros," romantic, intimate love; and "agape," the word Christians used to describe the sacrificial, self-giving love of God. This is the sort of love God is calling us to have. Paul gets really specific about what it looks like. He describes love in sixteen ways, using eight descriptions to tell us what it is not and eight to tell us what it is.

<u>Love is not</u>	<u>Love is</u>
Envious	Patient
Boastful	Kind
Proud	Protective
Dishonoring of others	Trusting
Self-seeking	Hopeful
Easily angered	Persevering
Wrong-keeping	Grounded in truth
Delighted by evil	Never failing

What a clear, compelling, helpful way of defining love. This is what it doesn't look like; this is what it does look like. Now here's what's really cool: this list that gives us a true understanding of love is really a description of God's love. Romans 2:4 tells us it is the patience and kindness of God that leads us to repentance. The Psalms describe God as our shield, our defender, our refuge, our stronghold. God didn't make robots. In love he gave us free will and trusted us to care for the world, for his gospel and for his church. Romans 15:13 says God is the God of hope. The Bible is 66 books of God persevering against the darkness in the world and the darkness in the human heart in order to overcome it with his glorious light. Jesus didn't just say that he knows the truth; he said that he is the truth. Joshua 23 says every one of God's promises have been fulfilled; not a single one has failed. This is who God is, this is how God has loved.

That's encouraging. What is discouraging is that this list describing the antithesis of love includes the things that Paul has been addressing in his letter that are present in the Corinthian church. In 3:3 he calls them envious and says that is why they are quarreling. He confronts them on boasting on four different occasions! He says they are proud in three different passages. He highlights they are rude (which means to act shamefully toward other people) on five different occasions. He devoted 20 verses to their self-seeking in chapter 10. All the factions, divisions, and lawsuits in the church are the result of their being easily angered and keeping track of how they've been offended. You may remember in chapters 5-6 Paul says that there were sexually progressive people in their church who were exploring their "freedom" outside of intimacy in marriage through incest, homosexuality, and prostitution. Paul says some of them were proud about how liberal and progressive and culturally relevant they were.

In other words, if you understand the context of the entire book and what Paul has done here, you'll see he has not written a clever little encouraging poem about love for everyone to enjoy and read at weddings. He has confronted them and exposed that all the problems, all the issues, all the sin taking place in their church is because their lives are not characterized and motivated by true love. What they need to do is look to God, the very essence and definition of love. They need to look to the life of Jesus, the personification and perfect example of love, and learn to live their lives a different way.

It's sad that Paul had to write that to the Corinthians. I spent a lot of time reflecting on that this week as it pertains to The Creek. What would Paul write to us? I truly believe, by God's grace, there would be a different emphasis on the letter. Don't get me wrong—on occasion some of this stuff still sprouts up. Perhaps there will be a situation where there's a little too much selfishness and "what about me" mentality. Occasionally someone will get angry over an innocent mistake. At times there have been some sins that have emerged that have threatened to derail an entire family and it is heartbreaking. We aren't a perfect church. We have plenty of room to grow. But by God's grace, when I think about this church, I see sincere, beautiful, Christ-like love almost everywhere I look. I am brought to tears almost every single day as I think about the love of God I see at this church. I think about schoolteachers who pray for every one of their students by name before each day begins. I think about dentists who provide free care for refugees from other countries. I think about people in their retirement years who spend days helping young moms who are a bit overwhelmed. I think about an entrepreneur who wants to start a company that exclusively employs former addicts to help them get back on their feet. I think about a family whose children are a little bit older who is friends with a family with four small kids. The family with the small kids is overwhelmed with everything, and the slightly older family, completely out of the blue, gave this younger family a gift of several thousand dollars and said, "We want to invest into your marriage. This will pay for a babysitter and a date once a week, every week for the entire year." I look at so many of you who are picking up a "For the 317" bag to give to a new neighbor; you are putting in a gift card and taking it to someone who just moved in down the street to be a blessing to them and maybe have a gospel opportunity. You are taking one of these "for your one" cards, writing on it a name of someone who doesn't know Jesus, and putting that key tag on your chain and praying for them every day. Again, we

still have a long way to go. I can't even tell you the joy it brings to my heart as a pastor at this church to see all this love.

(Watch the online sermon to see love in action as Dan welcomes, celebrates, and prays for the Hupp family, who had three children and recently had triplets.)

We've seen that without love, religion is worthless, and we've seen what true love really looks like. Here's our final take away: only love will last forever. Paul unpacks this in 13:8-13. The Corinthians have placed so much priority and emphasis on what spiritual giftings they have—who is the best, most dynamic teacher, who brings the most insightful prophecy, who is the most charismatic leader. Paul says all of that stuff will eventually pass away because one day, Jesus will return. He will usher in eternity and the world will once and for all be set right. There will be no more sorrow or pain. God will wipe every tear from our eyes. We will be with God and God will be with us. When that happens, you won't need me to teach you about Jesus; Jesus will be right in front of you. You won't need someone to give you godly advice; God himself will be right there. All of these gifts will diminish and the only thing that will really matter, the only thing that will last for eternity, is love. Faith will give way to sight. Hope will transform into delight. But love will last forever.

I'll tell you two stories then I'll be done. The first comes from Clement of Rome, the leader of the church in Rome from 88 – 99 AD. Even though he was the bishop of Rome, he wrote a letter to the church in Corinth. In it he wrote these words: "We know that many among us have sold themselves into slavery that they might ransom others out of bondage. Others have sold themselves into slavery and used the money they received to provide food for those who were starving." Think about the depth of what he is saying. Only a few decades after Paul wrote to this church, exposed their lack of love, said that religion without love is worthless, showed them what true, Christ-like love looks like, and told them that love is the only thing that will last forever, Clement is saying that people from their church saw others in slavery and sold themselves into slavery to set others free. What a beautiful expression of loving like Christ, who gave himself as a ransom to set us free. Others saw people starving all around them. They wanted to help but didn't have enough money to buy them food, so they sold themselves into slavery to give others bread to eat. What a beautiful expression of loving like Christ, who gave his life to nourish our starving souls. Something happened in this church, and love began to win the day. Eventually it overcame the Roman pantheon and the Roman empire, and we are talking about it 1900 years later.

I've been thinking about the lasting nature of love all week. I asked God to show me how I have seen this throughout my life, and he brought a memory to mind from college. About 20 years ago I was studying at a small school in Missouri. I had an incredible professor named Doug Marks who was a great lecturer. In addition to his skill in the classroom, he had me and a few other students over to his house once a week. We could do laundry there. His wife always made us a fresh dessert. We watched Monday Night Football games occasionally. Every month or so Doug would ask me to take him on an errand around town. He'd say, "Can you drive me to the store?" or "Can you take me to my house?" Every time we rode together, he would have me pull over at a gas station and fill my tank up. It wasn't until I graduated that I realized Doug had his own truck. He never needed mine. He just knew I didn't have a lot, and on his small salary wanted to fill my tank up every few weeks. It's been 20 years. I have forgotten every lecture he gave. I don't remember the title of any of the books he assigned or any of the projects we had to do for his class. But I remember that he loved me. And I realize it wasn't only that he loved me—he was so connected to God that it was really God's love coming to me through him. I don't remember anything else, but I'll never forget that love.

We love God because he first loved us. We know what love is because Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. Let's spend our lives loving God and loving others.