

- Pastor Keith Madsen
Sunday, 09/20/15

“Five Challenges: Keep a High Standard of Loving”

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

As I said in my sermon last week, as I am approaching the time of my retirement, I thought it might be helpful to focus my last ten sermons on the ten thoughts I want to leave this church. The first five will be challenges which I want to lay before this church as you move forward, and the last five will be thoughts of comfort I want to encourage you with.

So now the second challenge I want to give to this church is, *this church needs to keep a high standard of loving!* Notice that last word. Many in our country are obsessed with keeping a high standard of *living*, but what I am calling us to is a high standard of *loving*.

The chapter we are looking at today, 1 Corinthians 13, is often called “the love chapter”, and it tells us how to love as Christ loved. Many people have had verses 1-7 of this chapter read at their wedding. It’s read to remind people of the true way to love each other. But I always give a word of caution about this passage. The only person who has loved as perfectly as the love described in this passage is Jesus Christ. Some even find this passage discouraging because they feel they could never measure up to this high of a standard. That is true. None of us can live up to this standard 100%. But we need to ask ourselves, what should we do about that reality?

There are basically two ways to live your life: (1) Set your goals so low you absolutely know you can reach them. When you do this, you won’t ever fail, but you won’t get pushed to your maximum potential either. It is like the story of a man who was driving through a rural area and noticed that there were bulls-eyes on all the barns and all the bulls-eyes had arrows right in the center of them. He was amazed that so many people could be such excellent archers in that region. He stopped and asked a farmer about it, and the farmer said, “Oh, it’s not so amazing – we shoot our arrow at the barn, and wherever it hits, we paint a bulls-eye around it.” Well, one way to live life is to set your goal at whatever you happen to be hitting at the time. (2) A second way to live is to set your goals high. When you do that, you’ll push yourself more, but you will sometimes fail. This is the kind of goal 1 Corinthians 13 is for us. Such goals can bring out our best. They point us toward maintaining a “high standard of loving.” Let’s talk about what this chapter tells us about how to do that.

First of all, loving others is the most important spiritual act we can do. If you listen to some people, or some churches or religious groups, they will tell you differently. Some will say that the most spiritual thing a person can do is to “speak in tongues.” There were people in Paul’s day who taught that, but Paul was bold to correct them. He told them, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

Others will say that those people who can predict the future are the truly spiritual ones. But this chapter tells us, “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all

knowledge...but do not have love, I am nothing.” Even having great faith is not enough, by itself. Jesus told his followers, “if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” That sounds like a lot of spiritual power, doesn’t it? Even so, Paul tells us, “If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” Nothing. Nada. Zip. Paul even says that if we give away all we have – an act which could be an act of love – but if we only do it so we can boast, so we can feel like we are really something, then even that gains us nothing if we do not act in love.

Second, love can help us triumph over all kinds of obstacles. Paul tells us in verse 7, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” And yes, there are a lot of things love has to bear, there are a lot of things love has to endure in this world. First of all, the person you love isn’t always going to fall in line with whatever you want. Sometimes they aren’t even going to want to watch what you want to watch on TV. Boy, the things we have to endure! More seriously, we have to endure that the people we love will get irritable with us at times. We have to endure that the people we love will disagree with us at times on important matters. It’s not that they dis-respect what we are saying, or that they don’t love us. It’s just that they are different than us. We have to *endure* difference in the people we love. Nowhere is that more true than in the church. Here is a closely-guarded secret – *sometimes our fellow church members do things to irritate us!* Oh, the things love calls us to endure! But love does not mean we will never irritate each other; love means we will stick with each other and care for each other, *even when we irritate each other!*

When we have a high standard of loving, we also have to endure the hardships which people we love go through. If you live like a little island to yourself, all you have to endure are your own health issues, and your own life crises. But the more people you *love*, the more you have to endure their crises as well. Most of you know the experience. Your child or grandchild loses a job or goes through a financial crisis, and you hurt with them. Wouldn’t it be easier to just not care? It’s easier to not care about homeless people when you just hear about them on the television, or when you just read the statistics about them. But then you get to know a homeless person. You learn her name, and you know she has a little girl the same age as your granddaughter, and you learn all of the hardships she has gone through, and you start to think, “There but for the grace of God go I.” And then you hear that she is assaulted on the street. Caring is hard. When people in Haiti are just nameless faces in rags on the television news, it’s just so easy to turn the channel to a sitcom or an old movie. But when you go down to Haiti and you meet actual people, and you know they are desperate for their children to go to school so they can have a fighting chance of getting out of their pervasive poverty, then it’s not so easy to turn away.

It would be easier just not to care for so many people. But love “endures all things.” When you love, you take on the burden of the person you love. I think of a video I looked at not long ago of a high school girls’ track event in Ohio. It was a hot day, and the girls were on a two-mile run. One girl had run as hard as she could, but still perhaps 50 yards from the finish line her legs started to collapse under her, and it was obvious she wasn’t going to make it. That was when another runner from a *different team* came up behind her put her arms around her and not only helped her make it the finish line, put helped the struggling girl to finish ahead of herself. In an interview after the meet, the girl who helped said that since she had already won the mile, it wasn’t so important for

her to do as well in the two mile, but I've got to think there was more to it than that. I've got to think there was a little bit of the kind of love 1 Corinthians 13 refers to, in this selfless act.

There is another aspect to verse 7, besides sharing burdens: love also "believes all things and hopes all things." You not only endure a lot for the person you love, but part of what you endure is to risk hoping for them, and believing *in* them. And, of course, both hoping for and believing in another person is a risk. When you do either, you run the risk of being disappointed, and that can be painful, but love means having the courage to hope for each other.

How does all of this work in a church? Well, we need to love each other, and we also need to love the people of this community. Loving other people in this church means we *endure* their hard times with them, by praying for them, encouraging them, and checking in on them, by phone or in person. We pray for each other on Sunday, but do we pray for each other during the week? And if we know a person is going through something stressful, do we call them and see how things are going? And when they are facing a particularly tough challenge, do we let them know we *believe in them* and are *hoping alongside them*?

And we also need to love the people in this community. Some of this we do by our helping with Mayor's Month of Concern, and other kinds of programs for people in need. It is vital for our church to continue being involved in these! However, it is also true that there are a lot of people in this community who have needs that are not financial needs, and who also need love. How do we love them? There is a book by Tony Campolo, which I just transferred from my personal library to the church's library, called 101 Ways Your Church Can Change the World. Included in his list of 101 things are ways to reach out in love through proclaiming the Good News, showing caring to people who are sick or shut-in, supporting the needs of young families, and caring for those with disabilities. We talk a lot about bringing new people *in* to our church, but that is not going to happen unless we go *out* of our church to them to show them love. Is that risky and difficult? Yes, but "love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Now, this church already is doing much of what I am talking about. We do much to help with need in the community, and even in Haiti and other areas of world need. I know many of you who call you fellow church members to check in on them, and I know some of you have brought guests to worship who are your neighbors, and I know others who have done great acts of caring for your neighbors who have been ill. Christ would say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" But we need to affirm what we are doing well, and then take a step further. We need to stretch ourselves higher and higher as we reach for that "high standard of loving" we read about in 1 Corinthians 13. I want to read verses 4-7 one more time, and as I do, think about how it challenges *you* to reach a little higher:

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends..."

I would challenge us all to that "higher standard of loving."