

The Good Life
Part 3
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January, 2017

Good Morning! You can turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians Chapter 13. The last three weeks we have been looking through 1 Corinthians Chapter 12 and 13.

I entitled the series “The Good Life.” As we entered into 2017 I saw all the infomercials out for exercise equipment, gym memberships, things of that nature.

And it made me ask a question, what makes a spiritual body health? What is the good life for those in the body of Christ? Are there some practical things that we can resolve ourselves to that will improve the overall health of our spiritual body?

And that’s what we have been spending the last few weeks looking at. Week One, we talked about spiritual gifts and how God has graced every member of His church with a spiritual gift so that we might exercise it, that we might put it to use.

And last week we talked about how a healthy body is unified. Although the members are diverse, although the members have different functions, we are in fact a part of one body.

And that doesn’t just have local application; it has regional and global application that God looks down and sees His body, the church. And we are to work in concert with one another. We function together.

And Paul is writing to the Corinthian church. It is a church that has divisions within it. It is a church that has allowed immorality in the city of Corinth to infiltrate into the church. It is a church that is fighting with one another, suing one another.

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, refers to them as worldly, mere infants in Christ, immature, completely defeated.

And Paul has emphasized in Chapter 12 the different gifts that share the same source. He has talked about the different members who carry out different functions but are a part of the same body.

And now he turns his attention to practising our gifts as one “in the most excellent way”, is the language he uses. And I will be honest with you, when I started this series, I wanted to jump straight to this chapter.

If there is a prayer that I have for our church, it is what is contained in 1 Corinthians Chapter 13. It is a prayer that I will be praying throughout the year of 2017.

So I invite you, if you consider this your home church, if you consider yourself a member of this body, to enter into that prayer with me for 2017 and just pray 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 over this church.

We read at the end of Chapter 12:

“And yet I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and 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.”

What we are going to look at this morning is the gifted, the genius, the generous, the God who is love and the call to grow up.

Paul opens the chapter by drawing our attention to three different types of believer who all share a common problem.

Verse 1, he starts with this:

“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.”

This was a particular problem in the Corinthian church. You would walk into their gatherings and many of them would be exercising the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. They would be proclaiming in the tongues of men and of angels the mysteries of who God is, but there was no interpretation.

People would walk in and hear all this noise, but their hearts wouldn't be penetrated.

And maybe to the outside it looked really good, it looked really spiritual, the people were quite worked up in what they were saying. There was conviction in their voice but it wasn't making sense to anybody.

It is a spiritually gifted person but they are elevating their spiritual gift; they are showing off, if you will. And they are proclaiming this and others might be looking and amazed at how spiritual they are, but it is disconnected from the heart of God, it is disconnected from His love.

Many of you will know that I did a one year missions experience in the inner city of Philadelphia. It was 1998. I had heard Tony Campolo speak on this stage. He ushered a challenge to any who would give a year of their life to missionary service.

And so I signed up. I felt the Spirit leading me to do so, and was sent to the inner city of Philadelphia, lived in the number one homicide district of Philly on the worst street within that district.

And I was immersed into another culture, another neighborhood, and sin's devastating effects were worn out loud in that community. There was high incidence of poverty, concentration of criminal activity.

And I remember being as a missionary sent out I thought I would be bringing the love of God to the community. I thought that I had the truth to come and share amongst the neighborhood. And do you know what I discovered?

God was already there at work. His body was already active and serving within the neighborhood. What I realized by the end of that year was that I was the student; they the teacher.

God had to take me there to teach me about who He is.

I remember getting to know my neighbors and one day it was a beautiful sunny day, everybody was outside enjoying the weather, enjoying a sense of community amongst all the row houses that made up our street.

And we saw an ice cream truck come around the corner and all the children's eyes perk up. We all know what that's like. I don't know if they come through your neighborhood; they seem to be concentrated in southeast Scarborough where I live; they always come; my kids are like a dog hearing – they can hear that little chime miles away.

And so when this truck turned the corner onto our narrow row housing street, everybody peeked up a bit. And as that truck drove down the street with its loudspeakers going, I started to hear what was being said over the loudspeakers.

And as it drove by, the voice over the speaker said, "Repent and believe the good news about Jesus Christ; put your faith in Him for the salvation of your soul or you will be eternally damned," something to that effect.

And it had the address and advertisement of a church on the side of the ice cream truck.

And all those who were getting excited for ice cream heard a completely different message. And I sat with that and as I watched it go by, I heard a message being proclaimed but a message that didn't stop to understand the pain that existed within this community, a message that didn't take time to build relationship with those who were living there, a message that just proclaimed a theology but was disconnected from the heart of God.

And do you know what my neighbors heard when that ice cream truck drove by proclaiming that message? A loud gong and a clanging cymbal.

When our gifts are not exercised from the heart of who God is, it's just noise.

So Paul opens Chapter 13 calling this fractured Corinthian church that, yes, your spiritual gifts might be activated but if they are not coming from the heart of God, they will still be active but it's a bunch of noise. It's a gifted gong show, if you will.

Verse 2, Paul says,

"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."

And Paul describes another type of believer, one who has been gifted in the area of their intellect. They are a genius; they can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge. All people stand in awe when they take the platform and articulate the hidden mysteries of wisdom. People might stand in awe of their intellect, but it's just a show.

Every year the ministry that I served with before coming to the church; we used to take Bible College students down to where Urban Promise got started, the city of Camden, New Jersey. It is a very difficult, struggling city right across the bridge from Philadelphia.

And for years we would take students who had spent a whole year studying theology into the inner city so that they could experience using the gifts that God had deposited in them, using the knowledge that they had studied to share with children growing up in the inner city.

It was a one week short term missions experience. And it impacted so many students' lives. Incredible stories of how it triggered a calling within them, and they to this day are engaged in ministry in the inner city.

I remember a number of years ago now we took one group of students. They had spent all semester studying theology. And when we go on these trips it's not about luxury, it's not about comfort; it is about a cross-cultural missions experience where you face adversity, spend long days serving others. But you encounter Christ in a different way when you do that.

And we would sleep on the floors of inner city churches in the city of Camden. It's not like sleeping on the floor at the Peoples Church. The rats are the size of cats and the cockroaches are the size of mice.

I remember they had such a bad problem one year that we actually took the students' desks and pushed them together and slept on top of the desks because you didn't want to be carried away in the night.

And there was one year when these students, fresh out of their study of theology, came to serve in the inner city, and within a couple days, what started as a mild frustration turned into a growing resentment that resulted in a revolt.

The students didn't appreciate the accommodations. The students didn't appreciate that the children they were serving were sometimes rude to them. And the students started to complain all week, 24/7, about the conditions of being a missionary in the inner city.

They had studied all year and could memorize doctrine, could articulate and amaze you with their biblical wisdom. They knew the doctrines, they knew the beliefs of the faith and had every box ticked. But they were far from the heart of God.

Instead of a heart being broken that people live in this circumstance every day, they were just focused on their own needs.

How is it that you can study theology in preparation for ministry, but have not love? And it results in a whole lot of nothing.

Paul then directs our attention to another believer in Verse 3.

“If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

Wow! What an amazing sacrifice! This is the social justice believer. This is someone who has sold everything, sold out for the cause, even to the point of giving their life. They have a faith that can move mountains. Who would argue with that type of believer?

How is it that someone can do all that and not be attached to the heart of God?

You know when I first started serving in urban missions with Urban Promise, when I came back from Philadelphia, I was serving in the city of Toronto, down at Queen and Spadina, a low income housing community known as Alexander Park.

I would go there five, six days a week and serve kids after school, get to know youth in the neighborhood, kids who were struggling with gang activity, who were on the fringe of going deep into that lifestyle.

And I would spend my days building relationships with them. I would take them on trips. I loved those kids. I would do all kinds of things for them and it was when I was first starting into full time ministry as a missionary.

And so I was still in the process of raising my support. I didn't have a lot of money at that point (I don't now either but...); it was a time where I felt like I was sacrificing some things for the cause.

And I remember in my quiet time one morning I was reading through the Scriptures and it was as though the Holy Spirit put His finger on a place in my life and God said to me, "You don't love these children that you are serving."

Have you ever had a disagreement in your quiet time? As He put His finger on that space and stepped into that space of my life, I said, "What do You mean I don't love these kids? I have given up other careers that I could have entered into because of the calling You placed on my life. I am raising my own support so that I can do this work. I give up all kinds of time with my friends and family and pour out my life for these kids. What do You mean I don't love them? I love these kids."

And then what He brought before my face was all the youth who were giving me a hard time, all the ones who would challenge me, all the ones who would say rude words to me, all the ones who were evil to me, all the ones who were unkind to me.

And it started to dawn on me that God was right. You see, I loved the kids that responded to the message. I loved the kids that would reciprocate the love I was showing them back to me.

But the ones who were giving me a hard time? Deep down somewhere inside, I resented them. I didn't love them. I thought I was sacrificing all kinds of things, but it was on that day that I realized I have so much to learn about God's love, a love that is unconditional and not dependent on the other person responding, but will still express love anyways.

And Paul opens Chapter 13 to a body that is fractured amongst itself, to a body that is fighting with one another and saying, “I will have no fellowship with so and so. I follow so and so.”

Paul says, “Your gatherings can be a gifted gong show. You can have geniuses that nobody cares about. And you can be generous but gain nothing.”

And it all makes us ask one question: what is our motive? Where is the use of our gifts coming from? What is the heart or the disposition with which we practice and exercise our spiritual gift? Are we like the spiritual brother – it’s done so that others can see? It’s done so that others can look at us and go, “Wow, they’re so gifted!”

Is it done so that others can be amazed at the intellect that God has given us? Is it done so that people can see how sacrificial we are, that we would give up everything for the cause of others, but it’s all somewhere rooted in ourselves?

In all three examples that Paul opens Chapter 13 with, it’s not the gift that’s the problem; it’s the person. The grace gift is good. The genius intellect is good. The generosity is good, but not if it’s disconnected from the heart of God.

And the heart of their gift was detached from love. It was a cold heart and a dead heart. And this is what is alarming about Chapter 13 to me is that a spiritual gift can still be exercised but not in union with His heart and not expressing His love.

And Paul then describes what is “the most excellent way.” And he gives us a passage that we love to read at weddings.

And in Verse 4 he says,

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

“It is not rude, 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.”

Paul describes what love is. And he also describes what love isn’t to a body that is literally ripping itself apart, to a body that is exercising spiritual gifts, but in a way that doesn’t draw people to the heart of who God is and doesn’t communicate His love.

I joined Peoples Church on staff in March of 2016. I had been attending our church for about 20 years – it’s actually 20 years this year. And I will be honest with you, Sunday mornings when you come to church; it can be difficult given the size and nature of how our church is set up to experience intimate loving community on a Sunday morning. It just is.

If you are not involved in a life group or a rooted group, I would encourage you to get plugged in to a smaller group because we need to experience that communal life as a Christian. We can't just have a Sunday morning where we are in and out, and in and out, Christianity. We are a community, one body knit together. And we experience that better in small groups because Sunday morning is a busy time here.

And I remember when I came on staff, the very first Sunday I arrived here; I started to walk around the church. I started to understand all the dedicated volunteers that makes this place work on a Sunday, all the back end activity that goes into a Sunday.

And I was wandering through the halls and it just struck me that you can be in a sea of people, you can be amongst a thousand people and still feel utterly isolated and alone.

And I was just sensing that and then I saw a gathering on the other side of the gym that started at 11:00. I decided to poke in, and it was the Friendship Class that was meeting together, a community of those who struggle with certain physical and mental disabilities, who have special abilities.

And I wandered into that classroom first Sunday on staff in the church and as I stepped in there was just a joyful atmosphere to the room. Everybody had a tambourine and they were worshipping.

And they invited me into their worship experience. I'm not the most gifted with a tambourine but I enjoyed stepping into this space where this community was enjoying just worshipping and had a certain freedom to express themselves before God. And then they stopped their program and they said, "We thank you, Pastor, for dropping by. Can we pray for you?"

And I said, "Absolutely."

And then this gathering surrounded me. They placed their hands upon me and this one young man named Ben prayed a prayer for me that I will never forget.

It wasn't because his prayer fathomed all mysteries or all knowledge or had this divine intellect. It wasn't because his prayer was so spiritually gifted that others stood in wonder. It was because his prayer had such a visible manifestation of God's love at the heart of it that it was completely overwhelming. I'll never forget that moment.

Love doesn't show off its spirituality. Love doesn't shame others with its apologetics. Love doesn't puff itself up with its sacrificial giving so that all others may know about it.

Paul uses a series of verbs to describe what love is in these verses. And one of the things that this list reveals to me is that love is not mere words or sentimentality. Love is a verb. It is an action word.

And we read these verses, we read the description of what love is and what love isn't (can we throw that back up on the slide behind me?). We read this description at our weddings, don't we? We love reading those verses.

A husband and wife are coming together. They are covenanting to love one another in sickness and in health, until death do us part. And within a few hours of the wedding ceremony, or within a few days, their patience is tested.

Who of us in this room would love to throw our face beside this checklist and use it as a mirror into our own lives? Few of us would get past the word patience. I worked the parking lot duty – I know that.

It would be very uncomfortable if I gave this list to my wife with my photo beside it and she was asked the question, "Describe your husband."

Love is not just mere words. It consists in our actions.

And as we enter into Valentine's Day where we hear the word love tossed around in our culture, I just want to take a few moments to really unpack this whole concept of love a bit deeper.

I was sitting with this text this week. I was at Tyndale Library where I like to prepare messages. As I was sitting there thinking about what love is, it made me ask that question. What exactly is love? By what standard do we describe love? Who determines what is considered loving? And how do we formulate the idea of love? What or who do we look to and say that is loving as an example of love?

And the Bible has an answer for us. In 1 John 4:8 the apostle John is writing to a church and he says these words:

"Whoever does not love does not know God..."

Why?

"...because God is love."

God is the standard by which we understand love. It is not a gathering of human beings deciding according to their ideas, knowledge or wisdom, what is love or what isn't love, because that is like the shifting sands, is it not?

1 John 4:8 doesn't say that God likes love or that God knows a lot about love. It says that God is love.

And in our fallen world, a world in which none of us would want our face up as the description of love besides these 1 Corinthians 13 definitions of love, how are we to understand this God who is love in our fallen world where we see a mere human love expressed all the time? How are we to understand a love without a visible demonstration of it?

And that is why the Bible tells us in John 1:14 that this God who is love entered humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

When you study the Gospels and you study the life of Christ, you see spiritual gifts that are exercised with patience, kindness, without malice or envy. When you study Jesus in the Gospels you see an intellect full of wisdom that does not boast, is not proud, is not rude or self-seeking. You see a love that keeps no record of wrongs and doesn't lord it over others who aren't as good as it is.

When you study the Gospels and you look at Jesus, you see a sacrificial love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, a love that never fails.

That is why when you encounter this Jesus you want to give Him your whole life because it is not like the world's love that is always shifting and based on conditions; it is an unconditional love.

If you want to know what love is, get to know Jesus because He is patient, He is kind, He always protects, always trusts, always perseveres; He never fails.

But Paul is led by the Spirit, when he is describing love, to include an important statement in the middle of his description of love.

In Verse 6 we read this:

“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”

At Valentine's Day we celebrate the idea of love, but to be honest with you, oftentimes it is just one-sided, a one-sided aspect of love. It is a romantic love. It is a love between two broken human beings that we celebrate. But it is a deficient love.

By including Verse 6 when Paul says, “Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth,” he is speaking about another side of God's love.

We like the warm, fuzzy, feel good love from God, but we struggle with the love that takes the form of discipline.

I have two boys. I love my children dearly. I care about them so much. But that doesn't mean that I am just warm and gushy with them all the time, that I just express mere sentimentality towards them, that I just say, “Yeah, do whatever you please, do whatever you want, because Daddy loves you,” and it's just this feel good love all the time.

My love for my children sometimes takes the form of discipline. When they are a little baby reaching out for a hot pot of boiling water on the stove, my love causes me to grab their arm and pull it away.

And they don't understand why I am pulling it away; they just want to grab that pot of water. They want to do what they want to do.

And it is my love that is driven into action to protect them from something that they don't know the consequences of.

What Paul is getting at is we are conjoined with Christ. His love is expressed in our lives. And sometimes that comes in the form of this feel good love where we feel it and other times it comes in the form of discipline.

If we have wandered to a place where we are unintentionally or intentionally delighting in evil, love, who delights in what is good, will come and protect us from that evil.

But we are like that child aren't we? We want what we want.

And maybe something is coming into our lives and we don't understand what's going on and our understanding of God's love gets shaken, but His discipline is an expression of His love. It wouldn't be loving for God to just say, "Yeah, do whatever you please."

There is right; this is wrong; there is truth; there are lies. And I am bringing up my children in the way they should go according to God's Word. Not based on human knowledge or wisdom because that changes every generation, but on the enduring Word of God that does not change like the shifting sands.

And so there is an aspect to God's love where it challenges us, where it cuts us to the heart, where it doesn't feel good.

Hebrews Chapter 12 describes that aspect of God's love that comes in the form of discipline. And although we don't like it at the time, He is doing what is best for us because He loves us and He is leading us into deeper understanding of truth.

So Paul also acknowledges that side of love that is so captivating to this world but also clear in maintaining what is true and what is right and what is holy.

So sometimes His love comes in the form of challenging us, disciplining us to protect us from ourselves and it cuts us to the heart.

And Paul was disciplining the Corinthian church. Paul was demonstrating that type of love to a group who was tearing itself apart. The Corinthian church was divided and immature because they had wandered away from the truth and from the love of God.

My prayer for us as a church in 2017 is that we exercise God's giving gifts to each of us, that we work as one body, functioning together, different ministries, different workings, but that we do it connected to God's heart of love. That we share the wisdom He has entrusted to us with love. That we practice forgiveness and keep no record of wrongs with one another. That we, out of

our intimate union with Christ, allow His love to flow into our lives and overflow out of our lives to one another, to our city, to our workplaces, to our neighborhoods, to our nation, to our world.

Jesus describes in Matthew Chapter 5 a type of love that this world needs, a love for your enemies, praying for those who persecute you.

Our Living Truth team was in Lebanon a couple weeks ago. They were preparing for a trip that we are taking in March to share about what the body of Christ is doing in response to the refugee crisis in that country.

Pastors who were displaced from their homes in Syria and find themselves in refugee camps, but because they are pastors, they are pastoring the refugee camp. Churches are emerging within these camps - the body of Christ incarnated amongst a refugee camp.

And our team met one individual and this man was a part of the Lebanon Army. When Syria tried to invade their country, he fought the Syrians to keep them from taking over Lebanon.

And after that war and conflict had ended, he had a radical encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. His life completely changed.

And when Syrian refugees started to pour over to the mountains into Lebanon, they weren't met with a warm reception because of the war that had existed previously.

And this man who had fought against these very Syrians fleeing into his country, these ones who he had been in a war with, his enemies now fleeing into his country, because of his walk with Jesus, because of his heart change, felt as though Jesus was saying to him, "I want you to feed them. I want you to clothe them. I want you to care for them."

"But they are my enemies. They killed some of my fellow countrymen."

"Yes, but it is My love that is expressed best when it is an enemy love."

So this man steps out and that's what he does to this day, uses his resources, his networks, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked refugee who is running to him for shelter.

And even his own Christian brothers and sisters sometimes look at his actions and say to him, "How can you feed these people who tried to take over our country? How can you feed these people who are our enemies?" Because he will feed and care for anyone who comes into his space – it doesn't matter if they are Muslim.

And other brothers and sisters will say to him, "Don't you realize that some of these people who are fleeing have beheaded Christians, have put them to death? They have a hatred for you."

And he simply says, "I am called to love them. I am called to care for them."

Love is not just theological words that we throw around; it is a verb, it is an action. It is not just talk; it is our actions that matter.

And when I look at our own lives, when I look at our city, our nation, our world, we are so in need of God's love. I so pray that in 2017 we have such a deep encounter of His perfect holy love that it spills out of our lives and starts to transform our church, our community, our nation, our world.

My prayer for 2017 is that if I walked down the street and asked someone about the Peoples Church who doesn't attend the church, that they might say, "I don't know what it is about that place, I don't share their beliefs, but man, they love people. You go in there and they are just; they care about you, they connect with you, they try and help you. I don't know what it is, but they are just so loving."

Wouldn't that be a great description? So will you join me in 2017 that we have an encounter with this God of love and that it changes our city?

Let's pray.

Father, we acknowledge in this room that we practice oftentimes a human broken love. Lord we look at that list and we acknowledge that we are not patient, we are not kind. We are boastful, we keep records of wrongs.

We pray that our eyes would be fixed on You and that we would have such an experience of Your love, of who You are, and that it would so overwhelm us that it would wash us clean of the bitterness, the selfishness, the keeping record of wrongs that we have maybe been holding on to for years.

And we pray that our city, our nation, our world would encounter Your love through Your church, through Your body.

Make this so and true in our lives.