

Epiphany 4  
**1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13**  
Love, Love, Love!

In the name of Him whose love for us is unfailing, my dear Christian Friends,

Our sermon text for this morning is about love. Love is one of those commodities that today is in short supply in our homes, in our churches, and in our world. It is also a most elusive thing. Everybody wants it. Everybody talks about how there isn't enough of it. Everybody agrees that we should all try to have more of it. But most people don't seem to have a clue how to get love or where love comes from. As Valentine's Day gets closer a lot of poets will fill Hallmark Cards with their definitions of it. Hollywood filmmakers and paperback novelists will cheapen it by trying to sell it to you as love-making when in reality it's nothing but plain old sexual immorality. Why even churches and preachers misuse love these days by using it as an alibi for condoning everything from false doctrine to homosexuality.

But God the Holy Spirit refreshes us this morning by raising love again to its proper place. Here in one of the most beautiful chapters in all of Scripture the Spirit uses the apostle Paul to fill our hearts with God's love. And as he does that, Paul talks about the three qualities of true love: Christian love is valuable. Christian love is unselfish. Christian love is eternal.

### I. Christian love is valuable

Nine times in thirteen verses, St. Paul uses the word love. Did you know that the word Paul is using is the same word we know so well from John 3:16? "*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" The kind of love God wants us to have toward each other is the kind of love which God first had toward us. God so loved a God-hating and Christ-hating world, a world that includes sinners like you and me. God loved us so much that he gave what he loved above all else, his only Son, to die on a cross for our great and many sins.

My friends, knowing where love comes from is the first step in practicing love ourselves. Love comes from our God. God's love is the most valuable thing we possess. There just isn't anything more valuable to us than that God sent his Son to die and take away our sins. St. Paul says here that showing God's love to our fellow human beings is the most valuable thing we can do for God. If we do not have such love, all of our other spiritual gifts will have little if any significance! Paul gives some examples: "*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*" (1). A pastor can be the best speaker in town, but if he does not love the souls to whom he preaches they will know it and his words, as beautiful as they may be, will fall on deaf ears. Moms and Dads can be ever so eloquent when it comes to reciting the commandments to their children: Do this, do that, don't do this! But if parents do not love their children enough to spend time with them, to hold and hug them, to take them by the hand to church, and to lovingly listen to their prayers, all of their eloquent exhortations to do the will of God will be lost.

Paul's second example hits even closer to home. He 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*" (2). The gift of prophecy is the gift of being able to understand the Bible and to explain it to others. The gift of faith is a heart that receives and accepts all the truths

in the Bible. These are tremendous gifts which God has given to every last one of us here in different measures. Our congregation, our church body, the WELS, thanks God that he has given us the pure doctrine of our forefathers and that he has preserved us all in the one true faith. Yet Paul says, even these great gifts, as central as they are to our Christian faith and life, make us nothing unless we have Christian love. What good does it do us to preserve the Bible in its truth and purity if we are going to let that Bible lie in the obscurity of our drawers? What good is the clean Bible if we do not love our God and our fellowman enough to study it in Bible Class, teach it to our children, encourage our troubled friends with it, share it with our unchurched neighbor, pray that it convert the heathen in foreign lands, and give our money with love so that its pure light can be preached everywhere in our country? What good is faith in “*God so loved the world*” if without love we act as though God so loved only north central Florida?

Paul has one more example for us of the value of Christian love. He writes: “*If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing*” (3). Here is a warning to all those who think true love is nothing more than a bunch of outward good deeds done for the poor and needy and less fortunate in society. I read these words of Paul and I remember those poor Buddhist monks during the Vietnam War who lit themselves on fire in protest. During the last 40 years major Christian church bodies have given up their main work of preaching the soul-saving Gospel in order to build low-cost housing for the poor, support revolutionary political movements in depressed countries, and promote every kind of social cause imaginable. Now Christian love certainly includes care and concern and help for the down and out. But just such outward charitable acts can’t be called Christian love. Just that alone is kind of like somebody rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Everybody may be comfortable and happy for a little while, but the ship is still going to sink, and in this case of human beings with a little more physical comfort, it will be for an eternity. You see, the love a child of God has for someone else must be a soul-love, a love for the whole person. A human being is a body and a soul. We can carry chicken soup to our sick neighbor every day for a year, but if that neighbor dies without hearing from our lips that *God so loved the world...* St. Paul says “*I gain nothing.*”

## II. Christian love is unselfish

Verses 4-8 read almost like a “what does this mean” section of the Catechism. They give us the meaning to the statement “*love your neighbor as yourself.*” In this section Paul tells us how to show this love to others. He tells us what love is and what love is not:

“*Love is patient*” (4). There are no deadlines of time limits when it comes to love.

“*Love is kind*” – not just in disposition, but it reveals itself in useful, beneficial, friendly acts toward one another.

“*Love does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud.*” Love doesn’t get a “big head.” It doesn’t act out to bring attention to itself. When a sports team wins a big game, they are more than ready to tell you exactly who number one is. The players might even fight with each other to get a place in front of the camera to tell the world how great they are. Love is the opposite of this.

“*Love is not rude*” (5). It is not ill-mannered. Good manners are more than just etiquette to the Christian. Love does not interrupt people to tell them whatever may be on our mind at the time. Love does not disrupt everyone else from what they want to hear or say to draw attention to ourselves. Love is respectful.

*“Love is not self-seeking.”* It looks for the good of others, not self. Love looks to help others when they need help of encouragement. Love gives an encouraging word to someone who has lost something or someone. Love is always looking to serve others.

*“Love is not easily angered.”* It is not “touchy.” It doesn’t flare up when its pride is hurt. When life isn’t going our way and we seem to think that we’ve been dealt a bad hand in life, we tend to want to tell everyone else about it, and if possible, drag them down with us. Misery loves company. No, love is not easily angered. Love is calm and patient.

*“Love keeps no record of wrongs.”* We are experts at this one. Have you ever done or said something like this, “Honey, can you wash the car?” and they might respond, “I don’t have time right now.” Then we fire back with “Well, you certainly had time to use it when you put a dent in the side of it!” When others do wrong, it is our nature to keep bringing it up using it against them. Love will not do this. Love does not delight in evil. Rather, love rejoices with the truth.

*“Love always protects”* (7). This does not mean that we erase the boundary between right and wrong. Our society tells us that true love is accepting everything about a person sinful or not. God tells us that love always protects. It will tell people when they are falling from God’s command in order to protect them from further harm.

*“Love always trusts.”* It is not gullible, but it has faith in people and looks for the positive as is called for in the eighth commandment.

*“Love always perseveres and never fails”* (7-8). It endures the trials of life with fortitude and doesn’t give up or lose heart.

Notice that Paul doesn’t describe this Agape love with great works, sacrifices, martyrdoms, or great triumphs. He uses ordinary circumstances in everyday life to show what love must be. When we exercise a Christ-like love, the great triumphs in life will take care of themselves. God has demonstrated the highest kind of love, and he also empowers us to the highest kind of love.

### III. Christian love is eternal

Christian love is valuable. Christian love is unselfish. And Christian love is also eternal. Paul tells us that with these concluding words: *“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 perfection comes, the imperfect 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 childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor 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”* (8-13). Do you see what Paul is telling us here? Paul is telling us that love is the only part of our Christian life that shall follow us to heaven. We know that all our material blessings will one day pass away, but what we sometimes forget is that even many of the spiritual things that we need now will no longer be needed in heaven. We won’t need great prophets in heaven explaining the Bible because there we will all have perfect knowledge of God. We won’t need our faith in heaven because in heaven our faith will be fulfilled and we will see for ourselves everything we had faith in. But one thing will be the same in heaven and that one thing is Christian love! In fact in heaven there will be more of it than ever before!

People are always skeptical about putting their money into things from which they cannot get a good return, be it a bank, a piece of property, or the stock market, and rightly so. There are too many Christians though who are being too skeptical about investing their love. They think they

will get no return or that the sacrifice is too great. What if the other person doesn't love them back? What if nobody appreciates or knows about what they are doing? What if they have to give up a night of T.V., a week of vacation, a few hundred dollars, a couple hours of prayer? How will they ever get that time and money back? My friends, what we forget whenever we think that way is that Christian love is eternal. What if the eternal Son of God had not invested his love on the cross? What if he had said: "Most people will not believe in me anyway?" Where would you and I be today? But Jesus did invest his love in us and Jesus has healed our crippled souls. Because Jesus loved we will know his love for an eternity. He now asks you and me to reinvest our love in others. You see, there are many more crippled souls who need to know him. That's why today Jesus invites us: "Love me, love my people." Amen.

Hymns: 494, 499, 498, 490