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A1253 – December 30, 2012 – 1 Corinthians 13:1-7
The More Excellent Way

If you'd turn with me to 1 Cor 12 remember that Paul's been talking about spiritual gifts. Actually his topic is "the spiritual ones" of verse 1, Now concerning the *pneumatikos*, the spiritual, the ones who technically are the tongues speakers at Corinth and who thought that they were on a higher spiritual plane than everyone else because of their tongues speaking. However, Paul has made several points about tongues so let's review ten points made so far about tongues speaking. First, there is a pagan form of tongues speaking. Not all tongues but some tongues are pagan. 1 Cor 12:2, when they were pagans they were led into this frenzy of speaking in tongues and it was a pagan idolatrous ritual. Second, there is a Christian form of tongues speaking. 1 Cor 12:3, true tongues speaking is sourced in the Spirit of God and is therefore content exclusive, that is, it can only contain Christian content and therefore is distinguishable from pagan tongues because pagan tongues are uncontrollable, you might say anything when led into a state of ecstasy. But true tongues is controllable because you are not in a state of ecstasy, the content therefore is exclusively orthodox. Third, there are many other gifts, not just tongues. In fact there are not only gifts but also opportunities and results given by the Triune God who works all things for the benefit of others. Fourth, spiritual gifts were not given for self-edification, they were given for body-edification. Fifth, tongues is placed last in the spiritual gifts list of 1 Cor 12:8-10 in order to deprecate its importance in comparison to the other gifts. Sixth, tongues, like every other gift is given by the Spirit who decides what our gift is. We don't decide what gift or gifts we have. Seventh, all the gifts are necessary to the body of Christ, not just tongues. The body of Christ is an organism composed of many parts that are all necessary to proper function of the body. Eighth, not every believer has any one single gift, not all believers have tongues, this does not mean arrogance on each one of us is distinctly gifted for our time and our service in

the body. Ninth, some gifts are more important than others. Paul ranks apostle first, then prophet, then teacher and so forth. As far as importance is concerned tongues is at the bottom of the list. Of course, the part of those who have the more important gifts but rather that those with more important gifts are to take special care of those with lesser gifts since we are all part of Christ's body. But verse 31, and tenth, there is still a more excellent way; and that is the way of love.

So today the more excellent way and this chapter is a parenthesis in the discussion of tongues speaking which he's going to pick back up in chapter 14. We know it's a parenthesis in Paul's thinking because the last verse of chapter 12 is partially repeated in the first verse of chapter 14 in order to bring us back to tongues. Observe in 12:31 the words "earnestly desire" and then skip down to 14:1 where you see the same words, "desire earnestly" used again. Same Greek word. And grammatically what this means is that if we were reading chapter 12 we could skip chapter 13 and keep on reading into chapter 14 and it would make sense. We wouldn't have that great chapter on love but it would make sense. All Paul would have said about love was the first words of 14:1, "pursue love." But aren't you glad Paul didn't leave out chapter 13 since they are the greatest words ever written on love?

Interestingly, Jesus is the one that started the emphasis on love. He said a very strange thing about love in John 13 when He said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." Now how is love one another a new commandment when Lev 19 commanded to love your neighbor? I think it has something to do with the fact that the world had yet to see the greatest manifestation of God's love, the sending of His own Son, to see what the real essence of love was really all about, John 3:16. And so when the world was introduced to the love of God expressed in the giving of His own Son Jesus Christ then Jesus could say, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. It is, according to James, the royal law of the King. And love covers a multitude of sins. There is much about love but the central idea of the NT is that God loved us by sending His Son and now we are to love one another in this fashion.

Now to open up this chapter Paul is telling us the more excellent way. And we know that way is love. But what is the relationship between the most excellent way of love and the spiritual gifts he's been talking about? Love is

the context in which spiritual gifts must be exercised if they are to benefit anyone. Love is the sphere in which the gifts are to be used. And if we exercise them in love then they will always benefit others. But if we don't exercise them in love then we'll be an irritating noise to everyone around us.

I take it Paul in 13:1-3 is taking a sampling of five spiritual gifts and illustrating how annoying we will be if we don't exercise our gifts in love. In verse 1 he shows how annoying tongues can be, in verse 2, prophecy and faith and in verse 3, giving and serving. All these gifts can be used without love and when they are you are just irritating people and it would be better if you didn't even try to use the gift.

As Paul says in 1 Cor 13:1, **If I speak with the tongues of men even of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.** The gift of tongues was given why? To warn unbelieving Jews of coming judgment if they did not repent. So the gift had a very important purpose in evangelism. But if it was not exercised in love then you became a big, noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, just a big annoyance to all the unbelieving Jews you were trying to warn. And people don't listen to annoying people, they tune them out. So tongues had to be exercised in unique, *agape* love.

Now I think it should be translated, **If I speak with the tongues of men, even of angels,** in other words **tongues of angels** are mentioned to heighten the point. He's not saying I did speak in the tongues of angels; he's using hyperbole to make the point stronger. Some people might think that if we spoke in the tongues of angels that would override the necessity of love, but Paul is saying, even if I spoke in angelic languages, without love it wouldn't make a hill of beans difference. So you have hyperbole used here and hyperbole is where you overstate something or exaggerate to get the point across. Notice in fact, in each example of verses 1, 2 and 3 he uses hyperbole. In verse 2 he says "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge;" it wouldn't make a hill of beans difference without love. And obviously Paul knows no one could have all knowledge, that would mean you were omniscient, obviously not the case. It's hyperbole. Love is necessary for the proper function of the spiritual gifts. In verse 2 he uses more hyperbole where he says, "if I have all faith to remove mountains..." that's a lot of faith, nobody has all faith. Anyone venture to say

they have all faith? Has anyone ever moved a mountain? Of course not, it's a figure of speech, it's hyperbole, and even if you did, without love you would be nothing. And then in verse 3 he employs it yet again. Nobody ever did any of those things, it's all hyperbolic exaggerations to get across the point that even if we maximized our gift to infinite levels it wouldn't benefit anyone without love. You would just be spinning your wheels! So plug your gift in here, I don't know what it is, but whatever it is and God wants you to know your gift, so plug it in here and ask yourself, am I using my gift in love? With my concern totally for the other person. In my case, my gift is pastor-teacher and I'd say, even if I teach the whole Bible verse-by-verse and word by word, if I do it outside the sphere of love, I am nothing but a broken record, a big noise, a waste of time.

In vv 4-7 Paul goes into the great exposition on love. Before we go into it let's make a few observations. First of all, Paul uses the word love nine times in this chapter so it's obviously of central concern. And every time he uses the word he uses the *agape* word group. There are other words for love like *storge* which is familial love and *philia* which is friendship love and *eros* which is selfish love. But Paul uses *agape* and *agape* is selfless love, it's unconditional love.

Second, Paul uses eight negatives and seven positives to define love. Love is this and love is not that; he gives both sides of the word in order to give an exacting, careful definition. This is not something you should resist, this is something you should embrace, if you want to define a word exactly you can't do it just by giving a positive explanation. People will distort that. If you want to really define a word with clarity and exactness then you have to explain what it is and what it is not. With the positives you are pushing the boundary out, with the negatives you are pushing the boundary in. The result in the case of love is that you find that love is not amorphous, love is not what you or I think it is, love is defined very carefully and that is what Paul is doing in verses 7-8.

Third, Paul is not leaving spiritual gifts behind, you can get lost in the exposition on love in vv 4-7 but you can see easily from verse 8 that he has not left spiritual gifts behind. His point is not to give an isolated exposition of love but one that compares love with spiritual gifts. Love never ends but certain spiritual gifts will end. Love is the more excellent way.

Fourth, if you look at the list of things love is and is not I think you will find they correspond nicely with the fruit of the Spirit and the deeds of the flesh in Gal 5. Love, in fact, is a fruit of the Spirit, as is patience and kindness and jealousy is a deed of the flesh. So in many ways the exposition on love by positives and negatives is an exposition on the fruit of the Spirit and the deeds of the flesh.

Finally, in the context it seems that the Corinthians who were tongues speakers thought that speaking in tongues is what made one spiritual. They thought the gift was so astonishing that love was irrelevant to the effects. And yet Paul insists that if you have not love you not only are not spiritual but you are a big annoyance.

Now I would say that fundamentally Paul assumes that you know that God is love. And if we are ever going to know what love is we have to know what it means to say God is love. So let's work up a definition.

First and fundamentally, love is giving yourself to another, it's not taking, it's giving. God gives of Himself to us. John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He *gave* His only begotten Son." He didn't withhold His Son from us, He gave His Son to us. Jesus Christ is the greatest gift the world has ever received and that gift comes out of the fact that God is loving. He gives us His Son as a free gift with no strings attached.

Second, love requires an object. You can't love if there is no object outside of yourself to love. God is love because God is in Trinity, He is one in essence and three in Person. The fact that He is eternally three in Person sets up different objects for each Person's love, such that God the Father could eternally love God the Son and God the Son could eternally love God the Spirit and so forth. God is in His essence love and the object of His love is His essence of three in Person. Jesus taught this in John 17:24, when He said, in His high priestly prayer, "Father... You loved Me before the foundation of the world." The Father forever had an object for His love in the Son because the Son is a distinct Person from the Father. Loving yourself isn't love, love needs an object outside of self. So the Trinity establishes that true love requires an object outside of self, it requires another person in order to be exercised. And that is why the god of Jehovah's Witnesses, the god of Mormons and the god

of Islam are not the God of the Bible, they all reject the Trinity and therefore the god they worship has nothing outside of himself to love. The logical conclusion is that the gods of these religions must create an object outside of themselves in order to complete themselves, in order to have an object to love. So none of these gods are self-contained, they all need something outside of themselves to complete themselves. Not the God of the Bible, the God of the Bible is totally complete in and of Himself, He needs nothing outside of Himself, He doesn't need you, He doesn't need me, He doesn't need angels, He doesn't need any part of creation. God is self-contained and He has loved within Himself for all eternity. So the second aspect of love is that it requires an object.

The third thing about love, and we're just trying to give shape to this word and a base, there must be a base for love, and that base is who and what God is. Human love is possible only because humans are made in God's image. We are finite analogs of him. So the entire doctrine of creation is presupposed. John 4:19, "We love because God first loved us." Love doesn't start with man, love starts with God and love isn't even possible if God is not love and we are not made in His image. What it means to say that man is made in God's image is that man has characteristics that are finite analogues of God's characteristics. For example God is sovereign and corresponding to that man has choice, the two aren't identical but they are similar. God is righteous and just and man has a conscience. And God is love and man has love, but obviously we don't mean an identical thing by the word love in those two propositions. God is love in an infinite way but man can love only in a finite way. The Creator-creature distinction must always be kept intact when we talk about God and man. We share no attributes with God, we share finite analogues to His attributes, attributes that correspond so that we know truly in part what it means to say that God is love, but we cannot know exhaustively what it means. But the reason we can even love at all is because we are made in God's image.

And the fourth thing about love is that true love is never conditioned on the object. Romans 5:8, "God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." This is what is so powerful about the kind of love God has for us. He didn't love you because you were so lovely. He loved you because of who He is. If His love were conditioned on who we were then He would love none of us. But His love is based on who He is and not who we

are. And that is how we are to love others, not because of who they are, true *agape* love is never conditioned on the other person's behavior or circumstances, it's only conditioned on who you are, it's a revelation of your own character. So if you love others then it shows that you have the love of God in you. And that means only believers can have true, *agape* love. It's not to say unbelievers can't have feelings that they mistake for love or emotions that they confuse with love, it is to say that they cannot have the love of God in them because they are not in a relationship with God through His Son.

And fifth, the fifth and final thing about love is that it has boundaries, if anything vv 4-7 are giving boundaries for love. Love is not what you think you should do, love is doing what God has told you to do. God gives the shape of love and the most loving thing you can do for anyone is to do what God has told you to do for them. They may not like it, they may misinterpret it, but God tells us how to love others. So we have to know what God says.

So putting the five things together we come out with *agape* love, the kind of love Paul is talking about, *agape* love is rooted in God's nature, it is possible because we are made in God's image, it is giving yourself to others according to the parameters of God's word and independent of who and what the other person is or is doing. This is the kind of love with which God loved us, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." And the big question is do we have this kind of love for one another? Most people condition their love on the other person's behavior, which is not *agape* love; what they are doing is irrelevant, who you are is entirely relevant. Have you grown to where you understand God's love for you as a wretched sinner for whom He sent His own Son to die? Once you truly grasp the amazing depth of God's love for you, you can begin to love others in this same way. And it is that kind of love in which the spiritual gifts must be exercised; the gifts must be exercised in the context of *agape* love. And if they are not then it's completely worthless.

Now verse 4 and here we have parameters put on *agape* love. What does *agape* love look like? What is the shape of *agape* love? To answer this question Paul gives seven positive and eight negative characteristics. He starts with two aspects that are two sides of the same coin. **Love is patient, love is kind.** Patience is related to time, it's putting up with a person for a long time, the word basically means "to have a long fuse," love has a long fuse with people, you put up with them. The other side of that is kindness or acts

of kindness, love is kind. Together it means while you are putting up with these idiot believers you are acting kindly toward them, meaning you give to them despite the fact they are not deserving. It has nothing to do with them, it has to do with you. Who are you? Do you have the love of God in you? Because God is the one who was patient toward you, God is the one who put up with you while you were in rebellion against Him and God was the one who was so kind to you by giving you someone to preach the gospel to you and to work with you and the Spirit to convict you so that you would believe unto salvation, even though you didn't deserve it. You didn't deserve anything but hell. Go think about that because that's the way you are supposed to act toward others. You put up with them and put up with them and put up with them and all the while you act kindly toward them, you give them things they don't deserve, but you do it anyway because why? Because that's what God did for you. Now He says I want you to do it for others because when you do you show them what I am like. **Love is patient, love is kind.**

Now he goes into the negatives, **love...is not jealous.** The Greek word has the meaning of generating intense negative feelings because of another person's success or achievements. If you're looking out there at people and you have generated intense negative feelings about them because they are successful and you are not, that is not love. You have allowed yourself to get caught up in the game of comparisons. Why do they get all the success and all I have is failure? Why do they have money and I don't? Why do they get the easy road and I get the hard one? You jealous person. None of us deserves to even be here, none of us deserves salvation, none of us. So get over yourself, stop comparing yourself with others achievements, they are not the standard. God may have given them notoriety, success and popularity and that is their trial, I assure you. Your trial is to not become jealous but to love them. **love...is not jealous.**

Next, **love...does not brag.** The Greek word means to heap praise on oneself, to be a braggart, to vaunt oneself. It emphasizes the speaking aspect; Oh look at me, look at my work, look at my looks, look at what I did. If that's you, you have forgotten a very fundamental thing; God gave you everything you have and God can take it all away. He did it to Job; Job was rich, Job was successful, Job had a nice wife, Job had ten kids, Job had good health and God took it all away, all of it. There's no room to brag, it's not about you, it's not about me, it's about God. God gives you life, breath and all things. When

you came into this world you had nothing, you were a naked little brat. And when you die you're not going to take a thing with you and your body is going to rot. So what do you have to brag about? Oh I'm so spiritual and God is blessing me because I read my Bible every day. No, He's not. God does not work on the merit system. Paul says I brag in one thing and one thing only, the LORD! **love...does not brag.**

Next parameter, **love...is not arrogant.** The Greek word is similar to the prior word; it means to have an exaggerated self-conception, to have a heart that swells, to puff up, to be proud. The difference is it's not the speaking aspect; it's the inner attitude aspect. And we all know someone arrogant; it's the way they act, it's the way they carry themselves, it's also the way they talk but underneath the talk is the heart attitude, the exaggerated idea of themselves that they are God's gift to the human race. You forget one thing - Jesus Christ is God's gift to the human race, not you. You are irrelevant, God can get along without you and the world can get along without you. But the world cannot get along without Jesus Christ. Be humble like Jesus Christ who took to Himself true humanity and set aside the independent use of His divine attributes to provide salvation for the human race. So don't be arrogant. **love...is not arrogant.**

Next word, verse 5, **love...does not act unbecomingly,** that is inappropriately. There are standards and love does not act contrary to standards and it's not acting in love when you act like an imbecile and violate standards. It may not be that big a deal but it's not acting in love when you do. It's not being considerate of others. It betrays selfish arrogance.

The next word, **love...does not seek its own.** This Greek word means you're not out for yourself. You're not out for your own interests. Most people could care about nothing but their own interests but you're to be unnatural. But remember, these aspects of love are all fruit of the Spirit and the Spirit does not seek his own so love does not seek its own. It seeks the best for the other person, which is always what God says. A word of caution, not everyone will interpret what you do as loving, they may get mad and they may yell at you and make a big fuss. The reason is simply because they're not getting what they want. They are trying to manipulate you and so when they don't get their way they lash out. You're actually loving them but they turn on you. Now don't worry about it, easier said than done, I know, but their reaction to

God's love through you is not your responsibility. Your responsibility is to do what God says is best for the other person, period. You're seeking the best for them.

Alright, next word, **love...is not provoked**. This Greek word means to urge someone on, to irritate them, to arouse them. It can be in a positive sense but obviously here it's being used in a negative sense. Love does not jab at people to irritate them, that's not the way of love.

Next word, **love...does not take into account a wrong suffered**. The Greek word for **take into account** means "keep records" "to keep score." Now there are two things here. First, this does not mean you overlook sin. Matt 18, if someone sins against you, you are to go to them and point out their sin to try and win your brother. Once the conflict has been resolved then the record is clean, you don't keep score. It's not fair to keep score, particularly when God doesn't keep score with us. But the key is that this only works when people come clean. If someone sins and sins and sins and never comes to you to set the record straight then obviously you're not going to trust that person, they are an untrustworthy character. But if the record is set straight then you must not continue to hold it against them.

Verse 6, **love...does not rejoice in unrighteousness**. Many of the Corinthians were delighting in unrighteousness, they were putting up with a son-in-law sleeping with his mother-in-law. In effect they were rejoicing in sin and that is contrary to Scripture.

By way of contrast verse 7 returns to the positives, **but rejoices with the truth**. We should all rejoice when the truth is expounded.

Verse 7 and the first one is quite different, **love...bears all things**, the Greek word means "to conceal," "to cover," the idea is to keep confidential. When a person sins or something happens and it comes to your attention, you are to keep that information confidential, you have no business going around shooting your mouth off, that's gossip and gossip is sin, you should keep your mouth shut. You should go to the person and try to restore them to the truth. The rule of thumb is to limit the information to the affected parties, otherwise it should be kept private.

Next word, **love...believes all things**. Now this doesn't have to do with doctrinal beliefs or you'd have contradictions all across the board. But this has to do with believing what people tell you, giving them the benefit of the doubt. Unless of course they have a proven track record of lying. But generally speaking you want to believe the best about things and not the worst. But this does not mean be naïve about things, you don't close your eyes and go around believing whatever people tell you. It's just that love gives the benefit of the doubt.

Next expression, **love...hopes all things**, and this has to do with a certain expectation of good that will come about in others, it gives room for spiritual growth, you don't just write people off because they have yet to reach maturity, you give them room to grow but you have an expectant certainty that they will grow and mature in the Christian life.

Finally, **love endures all things**; that is, it is able to bear up under pressure and continue.

Love endures but spiritual gifts do not endure, the doctrine of cessation is still a major point of Paul. And we'll look at it next week.

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