

2.27.10 Love Never Fails by David Achata

We've been spending the month of February looking at 1 Corinthians 13 because our mission is to Love People into a Lifelong Friendship with God. If that's what we're about, then we ought to understand what love looks like when it's lived out. So today we're going to continue our study of 1 Corinthians 13.

I was 17 when I started reading the bible for the first time. Although I grew up going to church and Christian schools, I'd never read the bible for myself. The place I started reading was the book of 1 Corinthians. I actually did it as an act of rebellion because the bible class I was in never opened up the bible. So, I shut everything out that the teacher was saying and I started reading. What I read shocked me and changed me.

I discovered that 1 Corinthians was a letter written to a really messed up church. The members of the Corinthian church were all rallying behind their favorite leader. Sexual immorality was rampant. There were disagreements, people were getting drunk in church and the worship service was out of control. As a 17 year old reading this, two thoughts went through my mind: how did all these people end up in the same church? and 2nd, sounds like I could fit right in!

The funny thing is that after being a pastor for a few years now, I'm seeing that the modern day church isn't too different from the first century Corinthian church. We've got all the same issues, sometimes the problems are easily seen, most times they are hidden, but they're still there. So Paul writes this letter with one simple desire: to get these Corinthians to stop idolizing themselves and their spiritual gifts and start looking at Jesus again.

In our text for today the issue the Corinthians were divided over was their giftedness. To get an idea of what's been happening; look with me to 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:7 (read text).

It's funny that we read this text at weddings a lot, when it wasn't written in the context of weddings. It was written in the context of a people who were all very gifted spiritually, but the problem was that they were not spiritually mature. So Paul has to write a letter to clarify—IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU. IT'S ABOUT A LOVE THAT SERVES. We've all seen this at one time or another in the world of professional athletes.

I'm not a huge basketball fan, but I remember what happened in the 94 NBA playoffs when the Chicago Bulls played against the NY Knicks. Michael Jordan had just retired and Scottie Pippen had become the star player for the Bulls. The score was tied 102-102 and if they won the game, they'd go to the conference finals. This game was a BIG deal. With only 1.8 seconds on the clock, Bulls Coach Phil Jackson called time. He'd designed the last play of the game, not for Pippen who'd been charged with inbounding the ball, but for rookie Toni Kukoc. What happened next will never be forgotten.

Pippen, who'd been the Bulls' leader all season long in Jordan's absence, was so angered by Jackson's decision to not let him make the potential game winning play, that he refused to leave the bench and re-enter the game when the timeout was over.

The game resumed without Pippen and he watched as Kukoc hit the game winning shot, a 23-foot fadeaway jumper at the buzzer. As the crowds went wild, Jackson and Pippen stormed off the court in anger and it's easy to understand why. Giftedness isn't synonymous with maturity and it doesn't automatically mean you care about anyone else.

In this room we have some extraordinarily gifted people. But giftedness isn't always equated with maturity. In fact, apart from Jesus, our gifts are just another way for us to engage in serious evil.

This is why St. Augustine once prayed—"what can save us O God, but your hand re-making what you have already made!" He knew that God made us each individually gifted, but that we tend to turn ourselves into the objects of our worship. This is why we need Jesus to do what only he can do through the gospel in our lives, remaking what he has already made. And this has to happen over and over again. This is why Paul continues with these words...(read verse 8).

If you caught that, it sounded like Paul just said that one day the gift of prophecy will not be needed. One day the gift of tongues will not be needed. One day the gift of healing will not be needed. One day the gift of prayer will not be needed and the list goes on and on. The things we focus on will one day be gone! Here's why—(read vs 9-10).

The word for perfection in verse 10 literally means "being brought to its end."

So what Paul is saying is that when things are brought to an end, one thing will remain—Jesus and he is love, so only love will remain.

Over the past two months, something amazing has been happening. On Wednesday evenings the whole church has been buzzing with activity. There are things going for everyone. I've been going through the book of Mark with the High School students, explaining everything verse by verse and then we break for small groups.

Up in room 305 from 6:30-8:30, I've been witnessing the gospel transform lives. I've been watching as students step forward to use their gifts and I am optimistic about the future of our congregation as I've seen them muster the courage to bring their friends. In fact, about half the kids who come have simply been brought by their friends at school.

I've seen kids step forward and say "hey, I can play music...." Or "I'm pretty good with sound, can I help with that" or "can I lead in one of the groups?" Wednesday I had two of them approach me and say "why don't you stay home with your family next week and let us teach!"

Many times, as the night winds down, we'll give students the opportunity to receive special prayer and through this, I've learned that we've got one young lady who has the gift of prayer and I think she might even have the gift of healing because when she prays, things happen.

Last Wednesday, she asked me a question "Pastor David, do you think God answers prayer?... I mean, has he ever healed anyone you've prayed for?" So I answered that God had never healed anyone I'd prayed for at the exact moment I'd prayed for them.

It seemed to me that she was genuinely trying to figure out why this would be true of a pastor. I mean, shouldn't a pastor be able to pray, and people be healed?

I talked to her about why being a pastor is so hard—people expect the pastors to have all the gifts! But we don't. Some of us are administrators, some of us are teachers, some of have the gift of knowledge or wisdom—and the list goes on.

"But the point," I said, is "we all must use our gifts so others will see Jesus Christ."

We can, however, easily get off track. Like the Corinthians, our default mode is to take all the glory for the gifts we possess. The danger of this type of moral

justification is that we do away with any need for Jesus. (Which is really a false Gospel—after all, who needs a savior if I can save myself...?)

We start looking at who does what and how good they do it. Then we start to offer advice and before we know it, being a part of church is like watching American Idol. It's easy to critique and judge without ever participating. But that's not God's plan. His plan is that we would be each using our giftedness together to reflect the perfect love of Jesus.

That's what this girl is doing—because she has a gift that I don't and she's using it! **And when we all use our gifts for the purpose intended, the aura of self-absorption no longer comes from us, but love comes from us.**

Here's something that blows my mind: One day, even the gift this girl has won't be needed because the real thing is going to show up one day. The point is not to lead people to us, because all our gifts come from God. Paul is writing from the standpoint that Christ is coming back and he's the one we are to follow. Until then, we are only mirrors of his character. Look to verse 12 with me. (read text).

The purpose of a mirror is to reflect something else. That's what we are. We simply reflect the real deal.

I woke up early Thursday morning thinking about the story at the end of Mark 8 where Jesus had just told his disciples how he was going to show the world what true love is by denying himself, giving his body as a ransom for many. But in Mark 9, we find the disciples walking down the road arguing about who is the greatest. I can see it now as they were saying to each other “I'm greater than you because I'm better looking... or taller, or I speak better, or I pray better.” Then another one pipes in—“no, I'm more awesome than you because...(and then they list all the reasons why they're more righteous)”

Just then, Jesus asks them “What were you arguing about a minute ago”, and they are silent because “when perfection shows up, imperfection fades away” (just like Paul said). They all see the foolishness of their silly conversation when Jesus questioned them.

Then Jesus says “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” In one sentence, Jesus instantly reversed the question of “who is the greatest” to “who among you is willing to give of yourself for the good of others?” because that's what love is about. How do you measure up against that standard?

In December of 2004, A group of soldiers of from the US Army was on patrol through a region of Iraq. To their horror a grenade was tossed into their HMMVW. Ross McGuinness, who had only seconds to think, tossed himself on the grenade, absorbing the blast, saving four of his comrade's lives. He died at the age of 19 and was the youngest soldier to receive the medal of honor during the Iraq war.

At the Medal of Honor ceremony, McGuinness's father said these words: "I guess about the only thing you're really going to remember about my son is that he did the right thing at the right time, because his life was very short. It wasn't an exciting story until it got right to the end, but he just made the right decision when it was required."

When I read this story I again thought of Jesus words—"if you want to be great, you have to be the least and servant of all..." And in another place "if you want to save your life, you must lose it."

Jesus showed us what this was like, in the smallest acts of kindness and in the greatest act of giving himself for us. This good news only gets better when we, then, are transformed to live lives like that.

As we seek to be people that love the world into a life-long friendship with God, let's have no pretensions of greatness. Rather, let us be marked by Jesus love that serves because that's perfect and never fails.