

**“Claiming Our Christian Identity:
As the People of Love”
I Corinthians 13**

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In a few days, Americans will celebrate Valentine’s Day. While St. Valentine was a martyr of the church, put to death by Emperor Claudius in the year 278 A.D., present day observances of Valentine’s Day have little to do with religion. Americans will celebrate this love and romance week by spending about 709 million dollars on candy, about 700 million dollars on flowers, and another 900+ million dollars on greeting cards. When asked by his teacher to define love, Dave, an 8-year-old said, “I think you’re supposed to get shot by an arrow or something but the rest isn’t supposed to hurt very much.”

In one of the greatest chapters of the Bible, the apostle Paul talks about love, too. Love for Paul is no second-hand emotion. It is a lifetime of devotion. So, I want us to take a closer look at this great love chapter of the Bible.

Here’s what Paul says about love: **“Love is essential, absolutely essential.”** Rock and roll star, Tina Turner, screams across the airwaves, “What’s love got to do with it? Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?” Considering her history of pain and abuse, we can hear in her very music a cry of desperation and despair. From a Roman prison Paul writes, “Love has everything to do with it.” Without love, eloquent sermons are nothing more than deafening noise. Without love, prophetic utterances are reduced to useless chatter. Without love, faith has no focus and martyrdom has no meaning.

Great thinkers through the ages support Paul's theory concerning the essential nature of love. Scott Peck writes, "As the years have passed, I've become convinced that love is the central reality of the universe and that our primary task as human beings is to know this love and to express it to those around us." When Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchy of human need on which much of humanism is developed today, he placed at the very center of the pyramid, the need to love and to be loved. When Eric Erickson unfolded the eight stages of human development, he began by saying; "The infant must form a loving, trusting relationship with the care giver in the first eighteen months of life or forever struggle with mistrust." Renowned psychoanalyst, Eric Fromm, asserts, "Love is the only satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence."

For us, more important than all of these, is the fact that Jesus Christ said, "By this, shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Now I've lived long enough and hurt deep enough and listened often enough, to know that the love wound is at the core of most human pain. We become addicts and abusive, competitive, and lonely people because we have not learned to drink deeply at the fountain of unconditional love. Paul Jones puts it this way, "My workalcoholism was born out of a craving to hear my mother say just one time, 'I love you.' She was never able to do it. She couldn't do it because her own father couldn't verbalize for her. He couldn't say it because his father never spoke those words to him." The sins of the fathers are passed on the children of the second and third and even the fourth generation. "Without love, life is not to be found," said St. Paul.

In the second place, this love of which Paul writes, "**Love is practical.**" J. B. Phillips translates verses four through seven like this: "The love of which I speak is slow to lose patience. It looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive. It

is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners. It does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep an account of evil nor gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad when good people come together as truth prevails.”

In a Peanuts cartoon, Charley Brown is pleading with Lucy. “Lucy, you must be more loving,” he says. “The world really needs love and you have to let yourself love to make this world a better place,” to which Lucy screams, “Look, Blockhead, the world I love, it’s the people I can’t stand!” I guess she’s right, you know. It’s always easier to love in theory than it is to love in practice. As Paul unfolds this great love chapter, it’s not just a matter of theory; he gets extremely practical in the middle of the chapter.

Love is patient and kind. An article in *USA Today* asks, “Why is everybody so short-tempered these days? What is this epidemic of anger sweeping across our country?” Then the author offers this conclusion, “It is the result of an increasing sense of self-importance and a wide-spread feeling that things should always go my way.” Nowhere is that more evident than on the highways of this land of ours. It reminds me of a story of a woman whose car stalled at an intersection during rush hour. While the lights changed several times, a man behind her relentlessly honked the horn. Finally, the woman got out of her car, casually walked back to the man’s car and said to him, “Would you do me a favor? Would you please go up and start my car while I sit in your car and honk the horn for a while and see if it helps?”

There’s an old British proverb that says, “Faults are thick where love is thin.” I’ve found that to be true. Faults are thick where love is thin. Are not the two people who stand in love at the marriage altar, the same two people who stand before the judge in divorce court? What’s changed? Personalities

are basically the same. Issues are usually constant. People are people. The thing that's changed is the love factor. "Love," says Paul, "is patient and kind. It's neither self-seeking nor proud." It's not in this game of life for itself but for others.

A former lover sent this letter to her friend: "Dear Jimmy, No words could ever express the great unhappiness I felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart. Love, Jennifer. P.S. Congratulations on winning the lottery last week."

Winston Churchill was asked, "Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you stand up to make a speech, the hall is packed to over-flowing?" He replied, "It is quite flattering but whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech, the gathering was for my hanging, the crowd would be twice as large."

Love does not envy, does not boast, it is not proud. It is not self-seeking. Love keeps no record of wrongs and does not rejoice in evil but rejoices in the truth. May I ask you a personal question today? Is there a Personal Hurt file tucked away in your soul? Have you made a mental checklist of all the people who have hurt you in your life? Does it take a full time nurse to tend to your wounds? If that's true in your life, maybe it's time to hit that delete key -- the best key on your computer. It's time to wipe some stuff out. Just let the Lord, by His grace, wipe it out of your life and take it away. Maybe it's time to take some of those old memories and those hurts and painful experiences that you've been mad about and run them through the shredder of God's grace until they're destroyed from your records. Isn't that what he means? Love keeps no record of wrongs.

A couple of weeks ago, I was wading through some of my own stuff, some of my own pain, and I was praying about it as

I drove down the highway when suddenly that old song came to my mind, "*All to Jesus, I surrender, all to Him I freely give.*" The Spirit was very direct to me in saying, "Howard, isn't it about time to just turn that loose and get on with your life?" "*Let me at the throne of mercy, in His presence daily live.*" Forgiveness, you see, fits faulty people and the first person helped in the act of forgiveness is you.

Love is absolutely essential -- life cannot function without it -- **love is powerfully practical.** It refers to the daily relationships of your life, the ends and outs of your business, the times of your personal relationships. It certainly applies to your family and the dynamics that go on there.

There is one more thing about this principle of love -- it's eternal. Love is essential, love is practical, and love is eternal. Love lasts. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. This love of which I speak today is unconditional in nature.

When our boys were grown, and we thought we had survived the teenage years at last, we sat down with them one day and I asked the question, "What did we do in parenting that was most meaningful to you in your years of development?" Quick came the reply, "Mom and dad, you just loved us no matter what. You set appropriate boundaries, you expected us to be responsible, you let us fail on our own and work out our own problems most of the time, but we knew that underneath all of that was a safety net. We knew that no matter what, you loved us completely and unconditionally."

I say to you, my friends, don't run out on your family. Don't distance yourself from your children. You don't have to indulge them to love them. You need not spoil them to affirm them. They need you more than they need your money. They need your presence more than they need your possessions. They know when you're around. I know there

are a few years in the midst of it when they don't want to acknowledge that you're even on the face of the earth but they need you then even more than they do at other times. Really be with them when you're with them. Talk together about the man on the moon when they're young and trust them to the God of the universe when it's time to let them go.

Love. Love is not here today and gone tomorrow. Love does not have an "if" clause in it. Love is everlasting and eternal and complete. Love is unconditional and when it gets hard -- and it will get hard -- then let love flow even more. Determine down in your soul that love *will* find a way.

As a boy preacher and a student pastor, I watched a wonderful retired couple grieve over the wayward ways of their son in a mid-life crisis. In a matter of months, the son lost his wife and daughter through divorce and lost his job through irresponsibility. He lost all of his resources through reckless living. I saw him bleed his mother and father for money and I saw the wrinkles come on their face. I saw them age with the pain of loving. Armed with "Psychology 101" and no experience as a parent, I marched over to their house to give them a little advice. I said to them, "You know, if Tom were my boy, I'd let him go." The mother, with a tear-stained face, looked back at me for a while and said, "If Tom were your boy, I'd let him to go too. But he's not your boy, he's my boy and because he's flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone, I will love him to the end." That's exactly what they did. They loved him to the grave.

"Where there are prophecies, they will cease. Where there are tongues, they will be stilled. Where there's knowledge, it will pass away but these three things remain; faith, hope and love and the greatest of these, is love."

It's been sung, "*They will know we are Christians by our love.*" Indeed they will! So let us walk with each other. Let us walk

hand-in-hand. Let us work with each other to spread love throughout the land. Let us pray and seek the guidance of our Father up above. For we learn to love others when we come to know that God is love.

Happy Valentine's Day. Amen.