

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 14, 2016

Love Is Hard

2 Corinthians 12:14-21

Love. Money. Power. Sex. These sound like the elements of the latest scandal in our nation's capital, or the ingredients for the latest reality TV show. But we don't really need to read the news or sign on to Netflix in order to encounter this kind of drama. All we have to do is open the Scriptures to this morning's text, where we get another glimpse into the passionate, potent, and perplexing relationship between Paul and the believers in Corinth.

Paul is about to visit Corinth for the third time. The first visit was the original mission in which the gospel was proclaimed and the church planted. Then, sometime after writing what we call 1 Corinthians, Paul made another trip to the church in Corinth. This visit turned out to be a disaster. Though we certainly don't know all the details, we do know that it was "painful." That's the word Paul uses to describe it earlier in 2 Corinthians (2:1). Apparently, when Paul arrived in Corinth, one of the believers made a verbal attack on him. That in itself was bad enough. But what made it worse was that no one in the congregation came to Paul's defense. Embarrassed and humiliated, Paul left.

Although he had promised another visit to Corinth, Paul rethought that strategy and decided to send another letter, this one frank and harsh. Let's just say it was certainly nothing that Hallmark would ever print and put on the display rack for Valentine's Day. And yet, it really was composed out of love. Paul even says, "I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you" (2:4). But Paul's love was tough love. He chastised the Corinthians for what had happened during the "painful" visit, and called them back into a proper relationship with himself.

And now, even though things aren't to the point where Paul is ready to say, "Apostolic hugs and holy kisses to everybody there in Corinth," he is finally ready to make his third visit. As he packs his bags, he has no illusions about what awaits him. He realizes that he and the Corinthians still have a long way to go in healing some old wounds and making progress in their ministry together. No doubt, there will be lingering issues that need to be addressed. One in particular is the subject of money. More specifically, Paul's commitment to support himself financially.

Throughout his relationship with the Corinthians, Paul has been consistent on this issue. He refuses to accept financial and material assistance from them. This is partly because he doesn't want any of the Corinthians, especially wealthy church members, to feel like they're his patrons or benefactors, and that he therefore owes them something in return for their generosity. This may be an affront to the pride of some in the congregation. What's more, some of Paul's opponents in the church have apparently accused him of dipping into the collection that he has been gathering for the poor in Jerusalem, as a means of supporting himself.

In the midst of suggestions that he's scamming his congregations, or that he won't play by the cultural rules of financial give and take, Paul reminds the Corinthians that this isn't

primarily about dollars and cents. It's about how the love of Christ should take shape in his ministry. In other words, the main reason Paul preaches the gospel for free among the Corinthians is that it demonstrates his willingness to lower himself, in keeping with the humiliation and suffering of Christ, so that the Corinthians can be lifted up in their faith and fellowship.

Paul says, "Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you" (v. 14). What a poignant expression of Paul's devotion to the welfare and happiness of the Corinthians. He's not in this for what he can get out of them, but for what he can give to them. That's the way Paul relates to Christ himself. He doesn't proclaim Christ, serve Christ, and love Christ mainly for the good stuff that Christ can give him. No, he proclaims, serves, and loves Christ because of who Christ is and what Christ has done. So the way Paul relates to Christ's people has to be consistent with the way he relates to Christ.

Preacher Tim Keller lays out a scenario that illustrates how we often love God just for the good things that we believe he can give us, rather than loving God for God's sake. Keller says:

Imagine being in a situation where you were dating somebody and you seemed to be falling in love. As part of getting to know one another, you let it be known that when you got married you were coming into a significant trust fund. The person who you're falling in love with said, "Oh, really? Well, it doesn't make any difference to me whether you're rich or poor. I love you for who you are."

Suppose, just before the wedding you learned that you weren't going to get that trust fund? When you relayed that to your spouse-to-be, he or she got so disappointed that they called off the wedding. How would you feel? What would that tell you about this person's love for you? What would you say? You would start to say, "You never loved me for me. You were using me. You loved me because I was going to get you somewhere or get you something. You didn't love me. You were using me."¹

Neither God nor the community of God's people are just a means that we can use to pursue our own ends. To love God for who God is, and to love God's people for who they are, is a sign of mature faith and sincere devotion. And we see Paul exhibiting that kind of commitment to the spiritual well-being of his brothers and sisters in Christ at Corinth. He not only relates to them as siblings but as a parent who's responsible for the welfare of his children. Because he's their spiritual father, he's supposed to provide for them, not the other way around. He even uses financial imagery to drive home the point. "So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well" (v. 15a).

Notice that for Paul, this is about more than just having financial resources. This is mainly about possessing relational riches. Yes, he needs clothes on his back, food on his table, and a roof over his head just like everybody else. But that's all taken care of, and not in a dishonest way. What matters most is that when the Corinthians look at Paul's life and ministry, they should be able to see the unmistakable resemblance between his way and Christ's way. The self-giving, self-emptying love of Christ, who poured himself out for their salvation, should be evident in Paul's relationship with them.

And when the Corinthians recognize the pattern of Christ himself in Paul's own life and ministry, they should know how much Paul loves them, how much they mean to him, and how much their relationship matters to him. At least that's the way it's supposed to work in theory. But in practice, on the ground, in the realities of the Corinthian church, it's not that easy. And Paul knows that. He knows that he still has opponents in the congregation. He knows that the reconciliation achieved in the cross doesn't produce instantaneous results.

He knows that it's going to take lots of time and hard work to mend what's broken. He knows that there are rival missionaries in the congregation whose message and methods are much more attractive than his. He knows that the more and more he loves the Corinthians, it doesn't guarantee that they're all automatically going to love him back. He even says so in our text. "So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?" Clearly, his affection for them isn't completely matched by their affection for him.

But isn't that how and why Paul got into this gospel ministry in the first place? Not because he, or any human being, knew God and loved God the way that God is supposed to be known and loved, but rather because God, in Christ, knows and loves us, and reconciled us, including Paul, to himself. The fact that we have 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, and other letters going back and forth between Paul and this particular congregation, which weren't included in the Scriptures, shows us that living into God's reconciling love, and working out its implications, takes time and patience and perseverance.

The relationship between Paul and the Corinthians shows us that biblical love is fundamentally about healing relational brokenness, through the preaching of the cross, in the power of the Holy Spirit, not in some utopia but in the hard and harsh realities of human life. And that's where we still are. As long as we're still on this side of the final resurrection, we'll continue to work and struggle and grow at learning how to love. How to love others in the church. How to love your spouse. How to love your children. How to love your parents. How to love your siblings. How to love your friends. How to love your coworkers.

If loving others were as beautiful and complete and perfect as the picture on the front of today's bulletin, perhaps we wouldn't have Scripture passages like the one before us today, where there's plenty of tension, jealousy, gossip, pride, money problems, and sexual misbehavior, among other things, in the church. But there's something else even greater in the church too. It's the love of Christ. Christ's love for us, and our love for one another.

It's Valentine's Day. A single day designated for cards, candies, and kisses is great, as far as it goes. But I think that the poignant and potent relationship between Paul and the Corinthians takes us even deeper. "What I want is not your possessions," says Paul, "but you." Relationships, especially with others in the community of Christ, are the most precious possession of all. Through Christ, God has called us into fellowship with him and with one another, so that we can seek each other's welfare, do what's best for one another, strengthen one another's faith, and enable one another along the way to salvation.

But that doesn't come easy. That's because Christlike love is costly and demanding. It requires you to expend yourself for others, which makes love hard. But love is hard because love is worth it. And love is worth it because lots of good and godly things go into it. Paul himself says so in his other letter to the Corinthians: "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" (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Paul persevered with the Corinthians, and we persevere with one another. We persevere because love, hard as it is, matters. And love matters because relationships matter, now and forever.

¹ As contributed by Bruce Goettsche at PreachingToday.com. Accessed February 11, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/october/5100515.html>>.