

I think it is one of the most misunderstood and misused sections of the Bible – and that’s saying something because there are a lot of Bible passages that people misuse and misunderstand.

It’s also one of the most popular sections of the Bible, and its popularity feeds its misuse.

1 Corinthians chapter 13

I would guess that for many of you the last time you heard 1 Corinthians 13 was at a wedding – you sat back watching the nervous young couple, so gushy in love and the pastor cracked open his Bible and read the chapter that has become the one of the collective “awwww” moment in American weddings.

“Love is patient – she looks so beautiful!”

“Love is kind – look at the smile on his face!”

“Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres – aren’t they so cute!”

On and on it goes - the seemingly quintessential wedding text. If we didn’t know any better we might assume that Paul had that young couple in mind when he first penned those words about love.

But we do know better. Did you know that’s not who Paul had in mind at all?

When Paul wrote these words he wasn’t picturing a young couple helplessly head over heels in love with each other. Do you know to whom he was writing? Do you know who Paul had in mind when he wrote these words?

He was writing to a group of Christians, a congregation in the city of Corinth who were so at each other’s throats that the congregation was in danger of being torn apart. They, like most Christian congregations, were a gathering of very different people. They had different ideas about who should be in charge. They had different ideas about what was important for their congregation’s future. They were different people who had a lot of had different passions and skills and ways of operating. They had a lot of differences, and instead of working together with their differences, they were allowing their differences to tear them apart. Paul had in mind a fighting, fractured, petty, and bitter congregation.

And I’m betting you know how this goes. On the playground, in the family, in the work place, or even here at St. Paul’s, when you take two very different people and you put them in close quarters with each other, add in some other stresser like a budget shortfall or a sickness and watch the powder blow. This is why religion and politics are not polite conversation at a dinner party because you take two different people with different world-views, passions, and beliefs, stick them in a room and often the results are far from pretty.

That is exactly what was happening in Corinth. It was bickering, pettiness, and infighting that prompted Paul to write the letter we call 1 Corinthians.

In the chapter right before this and the chapter right after Paul spills a lot of ink reminding the Corinthians that it was God who had made them different people with different skills, passions, and ideas, and that it was ok. Their differences could even be a good thing. That their differences didn’t need to divide them, but could actually be a strength in the long run as they brought their differences into one congregation that would be able to benefit from all of the different skills of all of its different members.

How could huge differences in personality and passion be a good thing? How could they ever come together in one room after everything that had been said, all the fighting, all the bickering, all the bad blood? How could they ever hope to work together in spite of their differences? Paul sets up the answer to those questions in the very last verse of 1 Corinthians 12: “Now I will show you the most excellent way”.

Paul was writing to a fractured, bickering congregation urging them to realize that the only way they could move forward was to start loving people who were different.

When Paul first wrote 1 Corinthians 13 it wasn’t an “aww” sermon for young lovers, it was a call to repentance for a stubbornly bickering congregation. This section of the Bible, as it was first written, is one of the most law heavy chapters I can think of. It is all about what we Christians *should be* like, how we *should* treat each other if a group of diverse people are ever going to get along. There is only one thing that can take very different people and bind them together rather than blow them up. Love, and the word love here isn’t a feeling, it is an act of the will. I am going to love you, even though you are different than me, by actively putting you ahead of me.

Ready for the law?

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal”

You may be able to speak and communicate in ways that just wow people, you may know a dozen languages, you may be eloquent, you may be sharp, you may be quick on your feet, you may have the gift of speech, but if you don’t use those gifts in love that is acting in the best interest of someone else, from God’s perspective your great eloquence is like your neighbor who gets up to mow the lawn at 5 in the morning on a Saturday.

“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.”

You may be the smartest person in the room, you may have huge chunks of the Bible memorized, and you may floor people with your wisdom, knowledge, and recall, you may know your Bible so well that no matter what happens in your life your faith is not

shaken, but if you don't use those gifts with love that acts in the best interest of others, from God's perspective (did you hear what Paul said?) you are nothing.

**"If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I am nothing."**

If you were to reverse tithe (instead of giving 10% of what you make, you live off of ramen in your parents basement and give the rest to the poor), no matter how many hours or dollars you give away, no matter how impressive that may make you to the rest of the world, if you don't use that impressive capital in love that looks out for the best interest of others, from God's perspective you are nothing.

And we know that's true – how crucial love is. You've all met the cool kid in school who doesn't use his popularity to love the kid with dandruff on the shoulders of his hand-me-down sweater. You've all met the amazing athlete who gets your team win after win but he's just a jerk to everyone he deems lesser than himself. You've all met the coworker who is so very skilled at what they do but they are more interested in climbing the corporate ladder than using those skills in love for their coworkers.

Paul's point is this: Love is the thing that takes a gift from God and makes that gift a blessing to everyone else. Without love the gift is pointless.

How's that for some law? And Paul is just getting warmed up...

This whole next paragraph is like Paul thwapping us upside the head with a Bible with every single phrase. Just walk through Paul's description of love with me.

Are you patient? No matter how much they test your patience...

Are you kind? No matter how unkind they may be to you...

Do you envy? Ever see someone with more obvious skills than you and get jealous...

Do you boast? Like when you see that person with more skills come into the room do you feel the need to make sure people know you have skills too?

Are you ever proud? If you do have some obvious gifts from God, does that make you feel really good about yourself?

Do you ever dishonor other people by talking about them behind their backs? Do you ever seek what you want ahead of what others want? Do you ever lose your temper? Ever hold a grudge?

Do you always protect? Always trust? Always hope? Always persevere?

Could it be said of you that your love never fails?

Do you see what I mean? This isn't an "aww" chapter of the Bible at all! It may be all about love but it's definitely more of an "ugh" chapter. It makes me feel pretty yucky about myself and how I treat the people in my life – especially those people who are different than I am. And that is what Paul had in mind when he wrote this to that bickering congregation in Corinth.

1 Corinthians 13 is pure Law. And as our 8<sup>th</sup> grade confirmands know well, the primary purpose of God's law, what it's really good at, is showing us our sin.

And that is why I say this is one of the most misunderstood and misused sections of the entire Bible.

Sorry if that bursts your bubble a bit today. If you are listening well today that probably does more than burst your bubble, it probably makes you feel pretty yucky about your love, right?

But do you know what? As much as I think this chapter is misunderstood and misused, I don't discourage young couples from using it in their weddings. Can I tell you why?

While this chapter may not be an "awwww" sermon when I apply it to how I treat other people, it is very much an "awe" sermon when I apply it to Jesus.

Somewhere along the line I got this really good tip: if you read 1 Corinthians 13 well (the way Paul intended it to be read) and you feel pretty yucky about how you've been treating others, read it again (especially that second paragraph) only replace the word "love" with the name "Jesus."

Jesus is patient – like a wet log thrown on a fire, the fire may be hot but it takes a long time for that log to catch. That's Jesus with us.

Jesus is kind – read the Gospels, look at how Jesus treats the people who felt very yucky about themselves in his presence!

Jesus does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud. Jesus does not dishonor others, he is not self-seeking, he is not easily angered. (Here's one of my favorites) Jesus keeps no record of wrongs. Jesus does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Jesus never fails.

The amazingly beautiful truth about our Jesus is that when he came, he spoke in the tongues of men and of angels, he had the gift of prophecy, he could fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, he had faith that could move mountains, he gave all of himself for the poor and gave his body over to Roman whips and a Roman cross, and all of it (every word, every bit of wisdom, every ounce of sacrifice) was done in love for you – love that acted for your good, so that you could be forgiven.

And that changes everything. It not only changes our relationship with God, it also changes our relationships with each other – especially those who are different from us. If you understand how unlovable you often are, if you understand how loving your Jesus still is, that changes how you feel about God and how you act for God.

And that is why I'm ok with young couples having this chapter in their weddings – because the basis for a strong marriage is two sinners realizing how they fall short of the love they should be showing each other and finding forgiveness and all the love they could ever need in the Jesus whose love never falls short, and then waking up the next day and trying to love each other as Jesus love them.

I do warn young couples that if they want 1 Corinthians 13 in their weddings it is going to be a little less “aww” about their love and a little more awe about our Jesus' love.

If that bursts your bubble about 1 Corinthians 13, I'm ok with that as long as you remember this incredibly important fact: Love changes everything. The Love of Jesus changes everything. It means we are forgiven. It means our guilty consciences are washed clean. It means we can begin to learn how to love each other. Love changes how we a congregation of different people can come together and not blow up in bickering and infighting. Love changes how you treat your spouse, your kids, your classmates, your coworkers.

1 Corinthians 13. Love changes everything. It shows you how you fail. It shows you how good your Jesus is. It shows you how you can improve in gratitude for the love of Jesus, and that, like Paul said, is the most excellent way to live. Amen.