Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for September 30, 2012

Released on Wednesday, September 26, 2012

“Faith Instills Love”

Lesson Text: Hebrews 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 13

Background Scripture: Hebrews 13; 1 Corinthians 13

Devotional Reading: John 13:31-35

Hebrews 13:1-3 (NIV)
1  Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.

2  Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

3  Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

1 Corinthians 13 (NIV)
1  If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

2  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 do not have love, I am nothing.

3  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 gain nothing.

4  Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

5  It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

6  Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

7  It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8  Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.
9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part,
10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.
11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.
12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.
13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

Learning Fact: To understand that “love is not what it says, but what it does!”

Biblical Principle: To examine our motives for what we do and say in the church. Does it tear our brothers and sisters down, or does it build them up in love?

Daily Application: To live our lives motivated by the love for doing His will.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Central to the Christian understanding of God is that He is a loving God. This becomes “real” for us when we have a personal relationship with Him. God is not a dispassionate Creator. The Lord God as revealed by Jesus is one who loves us in a personal way. God’s love is not based on our loveliness or deservedness. It flows from the deepest part of God’s nature in a manner we can observe and enjoy but not fully explain.

The perfect expression of God’s love is the sending of His Son to be our Savior (John 3:16). He comes to save us while we are in rebellion as His sinful enemies (Romans 5:8-10). There is nothing more central to the Christian faith than understanding the cross as an act of unselfish, gracious love for all men and women.

An intended result of God’s expression of love for us is the creation of a community of loving people. Christians are to be loving persons in imitation of their loving Father. The church is to be characterized by genuine, active concern for fellow members and for the community in which they live. Our lesson looks at this from two vantage points.

Love as Action (Hebrews 13:1-3)

1. What is the foundation for loving one another as brothers and sisters? (Hebrews 13:1)

The book of Hebrews offers us practical instruction on how the loving community of the church should function. This section begins with a universal command for the readers to persist in love. This is the Greek word philadelphia, famously used by William Penn to name his city in Pennsylvania, the city of “brotherly love.” Concern for one another is, at the core, motivated by the love of God (see 1 Thessalonians 4:9). The apostle Peter speaks of person-to-person love as springing from the deepest recesses of the human heart (1 Peter 1:22), just as God’s love for us is from His innermost nature.
As Christians, we should enjoy spiritual fellowship. The basis for this fellowship is brotherly love. But the deepest kind of fellowship is not based on what we do; it is based on the spiritual life we have in Christ. A church fellowship based on anything other than love for Christ and for one another simply will not last. For other references to "brotherly love" see Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10; 1 Peter 1:22; and 2 Peter 1:7.

2. What are some examples of Christian love? (Hebrews 13:2, 3)

Where there is true Christian love, there will also be hospitality (Heb. 13:2). This was an important ministry in the early church because persecution drove many believers away from their homes. Travelers moving from city to city in the ancient world have few options for accommodations. Lodging is usually found in private homes. The early church is known for caring for those who are on the move. Since this can become tiresome, a reminder is needed to ensure ongoing hospitality (see 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 5-8).

The fact that some have entertained angels unawares evokes the story of Lot in the city of Sodom. Lot opened his home to strangers whom he encountered at the city gate (Genesis 19:1-3). These strangers were angels sent by the Lord, but Lot did not realize this when he extended hospitality. The point is that it’s not necessary to have full information before we offer kindness to a stranger. Such is the nature of brotherly love.

The second example concerns those in bonds, meaning in jail or prison. There is a need for ministry to the millions of incarcerated men and women in our world (Matthew 25:36; Hebrews 10:34). This should be especially true with regard to fellow believers who are imprisoned (compare “especially unto them who are of the household of faith” of Galatians 6:10).

To remember them means to provide food and other necessities not provided by the prison system of the first century. The Romans do not incarcerate people to serve lengthy prison sentences as punishment. To be in jail is to await trial for corporal punishment, including execution. To provide for the imprisoned may include visiting for prayer and encouragement.

The third example is ministry to those who suffer adversity. This may refer back to the imprisoned, but seems to have a broader application to those within the church who are going through a trying season of life. We should offer help as if we ourselves are suffering. The church is to stand ready to minister to households visited by death, unemployment, illness, and other difficult circumstances.

What Do You Think?

Where do your strengths lie in ministering to the hurting? Where can you improve?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Listening skills (Job 2:11-13; 16:1-5); Availability (1 Corinthians 16:7);

“I’ve been there” (Exodus 23:9); Credibility through a consistent lifestyle (Matthew 23:3; Titus 2:7)

Love’s Importance (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)
“First Corinthians 13 has been called a “hymn to love.” It is sublime in tone and powerful in content. In a sense, this chapter carries on the discussion of spiritual gifts that Paul had begun in the previous chapter. But chapter 13 primarily is Paul’ description of Christian love. We learn that love is not a spiritual gift. Rather, it is the way in which all spiritual gifts should be used.” (Cook)

3. Why does Paul want us to understand that spiritual gifts will only have meaning when we are motivated by love? (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

Most Christians have heard the word agape. This is a Greek word, and the King James Version translates it as charity throughout this chapter. This translation accurately portrays the giving nature of the love Paul is describing.

However, the word charity has gained some associations over the centuries that Paul does not intend. Perhaps we think of the Salvation Army or World Vision when we think of charities. Paul does not have this organizational sense in mind, and he does not limit charitable acts to the homeless or the hungry. Paul is speaking of love/charity that is an active, unselfish concern for others, particularly for fellow believers (compare Galatians 6:10). We note that this same word agape is translated “love” in 1 Thessalonians 1:3.

Paul begins by describing impressive acts. But if these are lacking in love, they are worthless. The gift of tongues is a concern for the church at Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 12:10), and Paul later gives instructions to bring order to their use (14:13, 27). But on a deeper level, Paul challenges the motives behind using this gift in public: if not motivated out of love for others, it is merely show, just noise. It is love that enriches the gift and that gives it value. Ministry without love cheapens both the minister and those who are touched by it; but ministry with love enriches the whole church. "Speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

“Paul next referred to three other spiritual gifts: prophecy, knowledge, and faith (1 Corinthians 13:2). The apostle spoke hypothetically, describing a situation in which he had these gifts in abundance. He might be able to deliver messages from God, have insight into all sorts of spiritual mysteries and truths of the divine, and have such a strong belief that he could dislodge mountains from their foundations. From a human standpoint, these gifts would be impressive. But if while Paul had these special abilities he was without love, then from the standpoint of God, the apostle would be an absolute zero. The absence of love would rob the gifted one of his value.

Paul finally referred to two impressive actions that he might perform. The first of these would be giving everything he owned to the destitute (v. 3). Throughout the Bible we see the importance of helping those who lack what they need materially. The second action involves the apostle surrendering his body to be burned at the stake. This refers to martyrdom. Even this, however, may be motivated by self-serving attitudes of wanting to be remembered well. Regardless of whether burning, or sacrificial giving to the poor, the apostle’s point in verse 3 remains the same. He taught that if he did these actions and yet was devoid of love, he would not gain anything through what he had sacrificed. The absence of love would rob service of its value.” (Cook)

What Do You Think?
What are some warning signs that our motivation for serving someone is something other than love? What do you do when those warning signs start to pop up?

**Talking Points for Your Discussion**

John 12:4-6; 2 Timothy 3:1-7; James 2:1-4

**Love’s Nature (1 Corinthians 13:4-6)**

4. **How does Paul describe love in a positive and negative way? (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)**

Using both positive and negative terms, Paul described for the Corinthians what he meant by love. The apostle had previously hypothetically about himself, but now he personified love for his readers. First, the apostle noted that Christlike love is known for its patience and kindness. The first of these terms is passive, while the second is active. As believers, we are to have a long fuse (so to speak) to our temper. We must not retaliate when wronged. Rather, we are to remain steadfast in spirit, consistently responding to others in a gracious and considerate manner (1 Corinthians 13:4).

Next, Paul described in a series of terms what love is not and does not do. Instead of envying people, love is thankful for God’s blessing on others. Rather than arrogantly parading itself about, love is humble. Christian charity is never ill-mannered, disgraceful, or shameless to others. It does not seek its own interests or demand to gets its own way, but is concerned with the welfare of others (v. 5). Love is not easily provoked to rage or irritated. Likewise, it is not resentful. Expressed differently, love does not keep score of the transgressions others have inflicted. In addition, love never finds pleasure in the misdeeds and evil schemes of others. This last quality is paired with another. Love does not praise iniquity and injustice, but exalts in the truth of God (v. 6). Similarly, love is overjoyed when others promote what is right in God’s eyes.

**Love’s Preserving Quality (1 Corinthians 13:7)**

Paul ends this section noting four things that Christlike love does in fullness (1 Cor. 13:7). It “always protects,” which means it is always supportive and helpful. This also implies that godly charity has the ability to face trials and patiently accept them. Love believes all things, meaning it searches for what is finest in people and accepts as true the very best that they have to offer unless convinced otherwise. Love hopes all things, meaning it maintains confidence in God’s ability to turn evil circumstances into good. Finally, love “always preserves,” meaning it remains faithful to God to the end of all ordeals.

**Love’s Permanence (1 Corinthians 13:8-13)**

5. **How does Paul contrast love with the use of spiritual gifts? (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)**

Paul repeats some of his earlier thoughts about the loving person, but with a twist. Now he contrasts the enduring nature of love with the temporary nature of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge. Love is an eternal quality, being based on the nature of God himself (1 John 4:7, 16). When we practice genuine acts of love, we are acting as God himself acts. Thus we tie our motivations to the eternal.
The apostle’s readers had become overly enamored with their Spirit-given abilities. They did not realize that love should have been infinitely more important to them than whatever gift they might have had. Paul next stressed that one day even the most spectacular of spiritual gifts will cease to be needed. For example, God will render prophecy inoperative, cause miraculous tongues to fall silent, and end the need for the gift of knowledge. Here the apostle was contrasting two periods— an earlier one in which the spiritual gifts are needed and a later one when they are not. Yet Bible interpreters differ over the time frame Paul had in mind.

Paul used several examples to illustrate the difference between the two periods. First, the distinction is like the difference between the partial and the complete, or between the imperfect and the perfect (1 Corinthians 13:9, 10). The gifts of knowledge and prophecy, for example, put believers in touch with God only imperfectly. But in the later period, believers will be in full and perfect contact with Him. Paul’s main point: many things are temporary, but love is eternal.

6. What is a mark of a spiritually mature Christian? (1 Corinthians 13:11)

Paul next illustrated his meaning by drawing an analogy involving childhood and adulthood. The apostle said that when he was a child, he talked, thought, and reasoned as a child. But now that Paul had become an adult, he had set aside childish ways (1 Corinthians 13:11).

Learning to love is part of the process of maturing in Christ. The squabbles of the church and between Christians can seem very childish. Without love, we operate with the self-centered perspective that characterizes children. A mark of spiritual maturity is when one begins to take a larger view. That view is one of loving others consistently, even those who oppose and bedevil us.

There is a maturing process for the church as a whole (Ephesians 4:11-16) and also for the individual believer (1 Cor. 14:20; 2 Peter 3:18). We will not be fully completed until Jesus returns, but we ought to be growing and maturing now. Children live for the temporary; adults live for the permanent. Love is enduring, and what it produces will endure.

What Do You Think?

What are some “childish things” that adults tend to hold on to? How can we put these things away? What will happen if we fail to do so?

Talking Points for Your Discussion
1 Corinthians 3:1-3; 14:20; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Philippians 4:2; James 4:1-3

7. Can we fully grasp the true meaning of love apart from God? (1 Corinthians 13:12)

“Paul used the example of a mirror of that time to exemplify the limited understanding we have of God (see 2 Corinthians 3:18; James 1:23-25). Keep in mind that mirrors of that day were made of polished metal. Unlike today’s clear glass mirrors, those mirrors could not come close to capturing the real image of a person. It would only be possible when seen
face–to-face. The same holds true for our knowledge and understanding of this age, compared to that of the eternal age in heaven when we see God face-to-face.” (Pathway)

Paul’s word-picture tells us that even our best efforts at living the life of love will fall short, for our perspective is limited. This is what it means to know in part. There is a future time (then) when we will see without distortion. When is this time? We refer back to the debate noted for verses 9, 10.

8. What are three enduring qualities of a Christian life? (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Paul ends the chapter by noting three enduring qualities of the Christian life. We live by faith, hope, and love.

Note that all three of the Christian graces will endure, even though “faith will become sight and hope will be fulfilled.” But the greatest of these graces is love; because when you love someone, you will trust him and will always be anticipating new joys.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Try loving others better than you love yourself. (Hebrews 13:1-3)
2. If love is not the driving force behind your actions and/or deeds, then they have no lasting value. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)
3. What love is! (vs. 4-6)
4. Love endures all things! (v. 7)
5. Love stands the test of time, and eternity! (vs. 8-13)

CONCLUSION

Lifelong Loving

Our world is full of people looking for love. This is natural, for God created us to be objects of His love. Yet many are looking in all the wrong places. Because of this misguided quest, people are frustrated and even become jaded to the whole topic of love. Betrayal leads to disappointment.

This lesson teaches the correct attitudes and actions of love. We can love selflessly because we have faith in God and hope for the future. We can love consistently because we know that God’s love for us is eternal and will never fail. And we can love fearlessly, because our love springs from our relationship with God, not from any expectation of having our love returned by another person.

PRAYER

Lord, You have shown us the depth of Your love by giving Your only Son to be our Savior. May our churches be refuges of love, full of people who show love in attitudes and actions. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who died for us; amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER
Be an active agent of God’s love.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Our next lesson comes from the book of Acts, chapter 6 where we find Stephen calmly facing his accusers. Stephen offers the perfect example of true faith in the midst of his enemies. Study Acts 6:8-7:2 “Stephen Defends His Faith.”

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

Horace A. Hayes
Jesus Is All Ministries

www.jesusisall.com

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