

Gospel Culture (1 Corinthians 13)

Big Idea: The indispensable mark of a Christian church is love.

I could say this a lot of weeks, but it would be hard to over-emphasize how important today's passage is for the kind of church God has called us to be.

According to [Ray Ortlund](#), churches need gospel doctrine plus gospel culture. "Truth without grace is harsh and ugly. Grace without truth is sentimental and cowardly." We need grace and truth.

Listen to the three kinds of churches that Ortlund describes:

- Gospel doctrine - gospel culture = hypocrisy
- Gospel culture - gospel doctrine = fragility
- Gospel doctrine + gospel culture = power

We need both gospel doctrine plus gospel culture. In other words, it's not enough to *believe* the right things. Ortlund writes, "Few things are more urgent for us than to regain credibility as people who know how to love, for Jesus's sake, so that his glorious gospel is unmistakably clear in our churches."

I can't think of a more important word for us to hear at Liberty Grace Church.

It goes without saying that we want to be a church that believes and proclaims the gospel. We believe that God has given us a message: that God made us for relationship with him, and that he's made a way through Jesus for that relationship to be restored even though we rebelled against him. Jesus died in our place and rose again to defeat sin and death and to undo the curse of sin. That is amazing news, and it's at the absolute center of who we are as a church.

I'd go even further. We want to stand on what God has revealed in all of Scripture. We take Scripture seriously, and want to lean in to hear what God has said. That's why we open God's Word every Sunday. When we read it – even when it's difficult – we end with the words, "This is God's holy word." "Thanks be to God." We want to submit to and learn from God's word.

But even with that commitment to the gospel and doctrine, we can still completely miss the point.

In the passage we just read, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. If you've been around these past few months, you know that this church has problems. But they also have a lot going for them. As one commentator says, they had the religious thing down (Stephen Um). In the last chapter, we saw that they even saw evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in their church in giving them spiritual gifts.

But the problem is that some in the church who had been given spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit also had pretty bad attitudes. It seems that some believed that their gifts elevated them above others in the church.

Side note: one of the best ways to ruin our walk with God is pride. Anytime we begin to think that we are something, either as individuals or within the church, we're in big trouble. I've seen this happen with spectacularly gifted people and with churches who start to believe that they're a success.

In other words, the Corinthians had gospel doctrine. They even had spiritual gifts that went along with gospel doctrine. But they still spectacularly missed the point. And if we're not careful, the same thing could happen to us.

And so Paul wants to teach us a few lessons about what we need to know to have both gospel doctrine and a gospel culture. Although this passage is probably most often read at weddings, and that's okay, it's actually written not to a married couple but to a church.

Here's what Paul wants us to know. Three things:

Love is indispensable (13:1-3).

In other words, a church that has everything going for it but lacks love has nothing.

We could have the best preacher, the most amazing building, the best music, the best website, but all of it without love amounts to nothing. Individually speaking, you could

be a person with exceptional gifts and abilities, penetrating insight, and huge charisma, but if you don't have love your ministry doesn't amount to anything. Love is the distinguishing mark of a true believer. Love is the distinguishing mark of a church that has grasped the gospel.

Read verses 1 to 3:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

In other words, your gifts are not really the indicators of your spiritual status. It's possible to be spectacularly gifted and even to do great things and not possess the quality that matters more than all your gifts. What is that quality? Love.

Without love, we're offensive. Without love, we are nothing. Without love, we gain nothing.

It doesn't matter what else you have going for you. Love is the indispensable quality for every Christian and every church. Nothing – no ability or no act of philanthropy – can make up for a lack of love. We can have all the correct theology and an amazing worship experience, but without love, we have nothing.

Paul isn't saying that the other things aren't important. He's just saying that they're not enough. "Love is the necessity apart from which nothing and no one matters at all ...

at the same time, love is the field in which everything in the Christian life flourishes” (David Platt).

What does this mean for us? Let us commit to being a church with gospel doctrine. But let us also resolve, with God’s help, to be a church with gospel culture – in other words, a church with love. We’re going to see what love is in just a minute, but whatever it is, we absolutely need it if we are going to be the church God intends us to be.

Love is indispensable to what it means to be the church.

Here’s the second thing Paul wants us to know.

Love is sacrificial and active (13:4-7).

The problem with talking about love is that we all have our own definitions. Because love is so important, it’s also important that we understand what the Bible says love is. Verses 4 to 7 are going to help us.

One caution. These verses give us a beautiful picture of what love is. We’re not meant to pick it apart. That would be like taking a rose and pulling each petal off to admire it. As we look at it, it helps us to see the entire picture Paul is painting. Paul tells us what love is and it isn’t. There’s nothing theoretical about his description. It’s all practical. It’s all applicable for how we must act as a church.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

I think we can summarize Paul's description of love with two qualities.

First, love is sacrificial. It looks at the interests of the other person and puts them first. It's selfless. It doesn't look at what's best for me. It always looks at what is best for the other person. It seeks the good of the other person.

Second, love is active. Love is not something we just think about or feel. It's something we do. Paul's description of love includes 16 action words. "It is not conveyed by words as much as it is shown by behavior" (Platt). In other words, love does.

Love is not sentimental or theoretical. Love means that we actively seek the good of others that we meet. Love is indispensable. Love is actively seeking the good of others.

There's one more thing we learn about love in this passage:

Love will outlast pretty much everything else (13:8-12).

In verses 8 to 12, Paul lists three gifts that the Corinthians cared about a lot: tongues, prophecy, and knowledge. If you listed what they thought about and prioritized, these gifts would be at the top of the list. But then Paul says that these three gifts will cease to be important in eternity. They will no longer be important. But love will never become irrelevant or obsolete. Love will outlast so much of what we do as a church. That's why we should pursue love.

Paul makes the point that we're still in process right now. Nobody has reached maturity yet. We all have a long way to go. Right now we know so little compared to when Jesus will return. But love will be as relevant then as it is today. "There is one thing that is nonperishable, unspoilable, death-proof—love itself" (Stephen Um). So let's pursue love.

Paul wants us to know something important: The indispensable mark of a Christian church is love.

I dream of us being a church that is characterized by both gospel doctrine and gospel culture. I want to be a church in which we preach God's Word in its fullness and lean into what it teaches. But I also long to be a church characterized by our love.

The great theologian Jonathan Edwards was once asked what makes the church on earth look most like heaven in eternity. His answer was clear: it's love. It's the kind of

love that Jesus showed to us. It's the kind of love that he calls us to show to each other and everyone we encounter.

If you find a church that is all about Jesus and all about love, you've found something special. May we, by God's grace, be that kind of church.