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Rick Myatt

NOT LIKE THAT SMOKE DETECTOR

1 Corinthians 13:1-8

Dave Stone was the pastor of a huge church in Louisville until he retired a few years ago. He told stories of some warning instructions that seemed unnecessary. His mother once gave him as a Father’s Day gift some auto shades. Those are those big shades you put inside your car’s windshield on hot summer day’s to keep the interior of the car from being cooked by the sun. There were instructions on how to unfold them and place them around the rear view mirror above the dash board. The last instruction said, “Warning: do not drive with auto shades in place.” Um, with the shades in place you can’t see out the windshield. Is that warning really necessary?

He related another time when he and his wife were skiing in Colorado. He said at one point they were on the chair lift riding up to the top of the ski run. He said there was a point where they were 200 feet in the air. The skiers on the run down below them looked like tiny ants they were so far below them. As they came to one of the towers that hold the cables for the chair lift he saw a sign on the tower that read, “Warning: jumping from the lift will result in loss of lift ticket.” Well, that would surely get your attention because if you jumped off that lift and fell 200 feet certainly the worst thing that could happen is you would lose your lift ticket, right?

Thanks for the warning. I’m not going to give you a warning this morning, but I am going to give you some instruction that might easily cause you to label me Captain Obvious, or, I suppose, in my case Pastor Obvious would be more appropriate. Today is Super Bowl Sunday, but Valentine’s Day is in 2 days. Good timing, because guys who have been absorbed with the Super Bowl have the chance to make it up to their wives only a couple of days later. The Super Bowl is always the second Sunday in February. If January 31 were a Sunday, then the first 2 Sundays in February would be the 7th and 14th, meaning the Super Bowl would happen on Valentines Day. Wouldn’t that be like matter and anti-matter colliding? Wouldn’t the world explode? I don’t know. I assume it has happened before, but I don’t recall it. Maybe I’ve suppressed it from my memory. Anyway, despite this being Super Sunday I felt it appropriate to think today about a topic that is at the center of Valentine’s Day. One might think romance is the focus of that day, but I am thinking of something deeper than romance, something that is behind romance. I am thinking of love. To guide our thinking about love let’s turn to the “Love chapter” in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13.

WHAT MATTERS MOST?

These are familiar verses to many Christians, but it is easy to fail to come to grips with the power of them and their implications. It is not hard to summarize the point of these verses. The message is that love is what matters. This is so true that whatever we do, regardless of how impressive it might be, if the motive behind it is not love, then it is completely worthless.

Paul gives several examples of possible impressive feats, then describes in different terms how empty they are without love. He says if he speaks in the tongues of men or even of angels, but does so without love, he is only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. There are some people who suggest that the resounding gong Paul mentioned is a gong used in pagan worship rituals, but that seems to me to be a reach since there is no reference to pagan worship in the context. Plus, the point isn’t to contrast with false worship, but to depict the emptiness of the action. I believe he is alluding to loud irritating noises.

Think of noises that really bother you. One that popped into my head as I was studying this passage was the whine of a dentist’s drill. That is a noise I hate. It strikes fear in my soul. Acting without love you’re like that awful whine of a dentist’s drill. Or maybe the chirp of a malfunctioning smoke detector. Have you ever had a smoke detector start going off at 2 in the morning for no reason? The last time that happened to us we had our granddaughters spending the night with us. When we are taking care of them overnight it is always a joy, but an exhausting joy. We are tired beyond words, and a good night’s sleep is absolutely imperative. So we desperately need the girls to sleep all night. Then in the middle of the night that stupid alarm starts beeping. In panic we run around trying to disconnect the perverse thing. Paul says when we act without love we are that awful.

In verse 2 Paul lists some other impressive possible deeds and says even though we do these amazing things, if we do them without love as the motive and controlling force in them, we are nothing. We have accomplished exactly zero of any value. He repeats that idea at the end of verse 3. No matter what we do, if we do it without love, we gain nothing. It is all a complete waste.

Consider the list of seemingly impressive things we might do. Verse 1 mentions speaking in the tongues of men. That doesn’t seem like a big deal, because any time we speak we use the language of human beings. That’s the only way we know how to speak. So clearly Paul is referring to something other than that.This becomes more clear when Paul mentions speaking in the tongues of angels. Well that’s not something we can do. No one knows what language angels speak. Oh, sure they do. They speak English, right? I can prove it. In Luke 1:28 the angel Gabriel appeared to a young Jewish girl named Mary and said to her, “Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you.” What language is that? English. I rest my case.

Okay, maybe that’s not a very good case. But doesn’t English seem kind of inhuman? I’m glad I learned it early because it seems designed to confuse people trying to learn it. Consider the “ough” words. Try to teach someone how to pronounce them, then present them with cough, rough, though and through. Or show them the word record. It is pronounced two different ways and has different meanings. Or show them the words with letters that are not pronounced like debt, doubt, receipt and island. What happened to the “s”? If you sanction someone are you for them or against them? It could be either one.

Yes, it seems inhuman, but Paul wasn’t referring to English. He was using speaking in the tongue of angels as an extreme of doing a miraculous thing. The speaking in tongues he referred to is a miracle of being able to speak a language you have never learned. The Corinthians were kind of obsessed with that. They felt like it was a miracle that showed how spiritual a person was.

This chapter is the middle of a 3 chapter long discussion of spiritual gifts. This was something the Corinthians were obsessed with because they saw gifts as a competition to show who is most blessed by God and who is the most spiritual. They had seized on speaking in tongues as being the top of the list. You can get an idea of how big of a deal they thought it was from the fact that in the concluding chapter of this section, chapter 14, Paul referred to speaking in tongues 12 times. Paul’s point is, “Fine, you speak in tongues. Maybe you do it more than anyone else. If you do it without love, you are as welcome as a malfunctioning smoke detector in the middle of the night and what you’ve done has just as much value.”

Consider the other examples of doing great things that he mentions. There is the gift of prophecy. Suppose I announced that God had revealed to me that later this year the Russian military would stage a coup, successfully throw Vladimir Putin out of office and immediately call a halt to the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, suppose I said that later this year President Biden would announce that he will not seek re-election in 2024, and imagine that all of that happened just as I said. Wouldn’t you be impressed? Paul says if a person somehow had the gift of prophecy but exercised that gift without love, that individual is a malfunctioning smoke detector. That person is nothing.

What if a person had enough faith to move mountains? Or what if the person was so spiritual they gave everything they had to help the needy. Obviously that person is amazing, so much better than we are, right? Well, if they do such astounding and impressive looking things, but do them without love, they’re like the whine of a dentist’s drill. Everything they are and do amounts to a big fat zero.

Imagine a pastor who is charismatic, a gifted speaker and dynamic leader. He has built a church from a handful of people into a massive megachurch attended by thousands. He has gone to third world countries and ministered there. He has authored several books, he is in great demand as a speaker at conferences and retreats. He is bringing people into the kingdom of God. He is internationally known and hugely popular. But he is often harsh, impatient and unkind to people in his personal interactions. That reveals he is not driven by love, but by something else. People are hugely impressed with this man. But God says he is a noisy malfunctioning smoke detector. He is a zero with the rims kicked off. Here’s what saddens me. I could name several famous pastors whom I know for a fact fit that description all too well.

Why does God make love such a priority? Why is it more important than just about anything else? 1 John 4:8 says God is love. The Bible says a lot about God. But that one is a particularly interesting statement. John didn’t say God is loving, or God loves. The Bible frequently says God is holy, among other characteristics. But for that statement to be parallel to 1 John 4:8 it would need to be “God is holiness.” Holy is an adjective, while love is a noun. John said God is the thing itself. He is love. God is what love is. The Bible says often that God is good. But again, good is an adjective. To say something similar to what John said one would have to say, “God is goodness.”

1 John 4:8 is unique when it says God is love. It is a way of saying that God is the definition of love. He embodies love, for it is woven into everything he is and does. Everything God is and does is driven by love and totally infused with love. Whatever God does is the most loving thing that could be done. God never does anything that is not motivated by and determined by love.

What does that tell us about the nature of reality and of the universe? It means that the goal behind all that God has made is love. It is intended to bring good to us. This is not always obvious to us. The more common human way of thinking is “Why do these things always happen to me?” It feels to us like there are forces against us and too often things don’t go our way.

Laurie was recently reading about the kind of melanoma I have been diagnosed with. We knew that the kind I have is rare, but she found out that it is the rarest form of the disease. This complicates things for me because there is not as much data on treatment of it. My reaction to this is, “Of course. I wouldn’t expect anything else.” That’s how things always seem to go for me.” But it is easy to fail to notice how many huge blessings I have been given. I had two loving parents who were good and wise. I have a brother who has always loved me. God gave me a wife who is the most unique person I know. She is the best person I have ever known, the best and most loving, delightful and fun friend, companion and lover I could ever imagine. In fact, I never imagined having such a person as a life partner. These are blessings more valuable than anyone could calculate. They are evidences of God’s love at work in my life. There are many more. This should change how we think about life. At the core of creation is love. Behind everything that happens is God’s love, intending good for us.

WHAT IS LOVE LIKE?

What does it mean when we say we love someone? We mean a number of different things by it. We might mean we like someone, or we have an affinity with someone, or we have affection for them. It is easy to say we love people, but fail to actually put love into action. But love means we are committed to seeking that person’s good no matter what. Paul depicts what that looks like in verses 4-8.

***Patient***

It is no accident that Paul says the way love acts is that it is patient. That is a tough one for our culture. We don’t like having to be patient about anything. That little symbol with dots circling on the screen of your computer, phone or TV is a gauge of this. How much do you hate it? How long will you put up with it before you turn it off in exasperation and disgust?

So patience is not a strength for many of us. But the patience Paul refers to here is a particular kind of patience. It is patience with people. I don’t think of myself as an especially impatient person, but even last week I got a reminder that when it comes to people, I’m maybe not as patient as I’d like to think. One evening I drove to pick up some food for dinner. I came to an intersection where I was going to turn right. The light was red. There was one car turning right in front of me. This person just stopped and sat there. There was no traffic coming, so the individual was free to proceed, but they just sat there. I have no idea why this driver kept waiting. But it wasn’t very long before I was talking to this person. “What are you waiting for, Nimrod? Do you need a personal invitation or something?” This dimwit probably cost me an entire 30 seconds. It was intolerable, I tell you! Yeah, so maybe patience with people when they’re not doing what I want them to do could possibly be in somewhat short supply.

Driving is a particular weak spot for many of us, but other drivers are not the only people who test our patience. So will spouses, parents, children, neighbors, friends, siblings, fellow church members, bosses, co-workers, clerks in stores, and every stripe of human being. If we love people, we are committed to seeking their good. If we truly want their good, then we will be patient with them because our impatience and annoyance most certainly is not going to feel good to them.

Rhea Zakich is a woman who developed polyps on her vocal chords. Doctors removed the polyps and told her she should fully recover her voice, but told her she needed to not speak for a couple of months. She said the enforced period of silence taught her a lot. One day her son, Dean, came home from school angry, saying, “I hate my teacher. I’m never going back to school again.” She said that prior to her vocal chord issues she would have immediately responded, “Yes, you are going back to school, even if I have to personally drag you there.” There would have been some parental lecturing about his attitude. But she couldn’t say anything. All she could do was listen. He laid down on the couch next to her and poured out his heart. He had to give a report that day and he mispronounced some words. The teacher corrected him and kids in the class laughed at him. He said he was so embarrassed. All she could do was wrap her arms around him and hold him. Pretty soon he quieted down. Then after several minutes he suddenly jumped up and said, “I’m supposed to meet Jimmy at his house. Thanks, Mom.” Then he went out to play. She realized he didn’t need to be lectured, he didn’t need to be corrected or criticized. He was hurt. He just needed someone to be patient with him and listen. Because of her medical need she was forced to be patient, and that is exactly what was needed.

***Kind***

The second thing Paul notes about love is that it is kind. That ought to be fairly obvious since if you are seeking someone’s good continually you will be kind to them. Yet it is all too often that we are unkind to people in our words, tone, expression or treatment of them.

There is a scene in the movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* that reminds us of the need for kindness. The film tells of a group of British retirees who seek retirement in what turns out to be a dilapidated hotel in Jaipur, India. Maggie Smith plays Muriel Donnelly, a cranky, wheelchair bound woman. The hotel assigns a maid named Anokhi, who is a Dalit, a lowest caste woman, to care for her. At one point Anokhi invites Muriel to her home so her family can meet her. Muriel goes with a translator because Anokhi’s family does not speak English. The family showers Muriel with food and kindness. Muriel asks the translator why. The translator responds, “Because you have been so kind to Anokhi.” Muriel is ashamed because she has not treated the poor woman well at all. She says, “But I haven’t been kind to her.” The translator responds, “You’re the only one who acknowledges her.” For the poor, low caste woman, the fact that Muriel saw her and talked to her was an acknowledgement of her human dignity and worth, which others denied her.

Every person we come into contact with throughout our lives is longing for someone to acknowledge their worth, to care about their hurts and needs, to be sensitive to their feelings and vulnerabilities, to help them with their burdens. In short, they are wishing people would just be kind to them. That’s what love does.

A number of years ago we were at the Maui airport checking in for a flight home from vacation. I determine every time we go on vacation that this time we are going to pack light. And somehow we end up with a lot of luggage. That was the case that day. The airport was a madhouse. The lines were long everywhere. We had to turn in our rental car, then take a shuttle to the terminal, then go through an agricultural inspection of our bags, then we had to check in, then we had to go through TSA. I was wrangling a big bag that had all of our recreational gear, plus a suitcase, a carry on bag and a backpack, while keeping track of my ID all the way through all those lines, navigating around the thousands of other people doing similar things. I got near the counter, moving all our bags, feeling stressed and overwhelmed by the scene. As it came to be our turn, one of the airline agents for some reason took pity on me. She came out from behind the counter, said, “You look like you could use a little help, Sir. Let me handle those bags for you,” then grabbed first our suitcase then our big bag, put them on the scale and proceeded to take care of the check in process. She didn’t do that for any other passengers as far as I could see, nor did any of the other agents. I said to her, “Thank you so much for helping me. I can’t believe you went out of your way to do that. It was so kind of you.” She just said, “You’re welcome. It just looked to me like you needed a hand.” The other personnel that I observed were business like, but had at times a hint of impatience. This woman was cheerful, helpful and kind to me. That woman spends her whole day dealing with clueless passengers and their luggage, over and over again. There was no reason for her to make an extra effort for me. Maybe she just was trying to speed things along and suspected I was going to seriously slow things down. I don’t know why she did it, but she made an extra, unusual effort to show kindness to me, a random total stranger to her. It made a big impression on me. I still remember that years later. Kindness can have a big effect on us. And a lack of kindness will be remembered even longer.

***Not Self Seeking***

In verse 5 Paul said that love is not self seeking. That is at the heart of love. Love is not about making ourselves feel good or being happy. When our focus is on our own needs and desires being met, on feeling good or being happy, we are actually trying to use another person for our own good. That is not love, it is self-service. Love is inherently giving. It means sacrificing self for the good of another person.

The ultimate example of love is Jesus dying on a cross for us. He was not serving himself, protecting himself, seeking to have his needs met, trying to feel good. He totally sacrificed himself to gain good for us. At its deepest core that’s what love always does.

Because love is inherently and necessarily self sacrificing we have an inevitable tension. We long to love and be loved, we were created to love, but our incessant default, our natural human bent, is to serve our own self focused interest. Pastor and writer, Mark Buchanan, says, “Our lust for power militates against our need to love and be loved… Love makes us vulnerable. Love renders us weak. Love exposes us to heartbreak. Love diminishes our control. Love makes us powerless.” He's right. When we truly love we give up power and control. We become more vulnerable. We seek to give and to serve. We stop thinking about ourselves and think about how we can care for and give to the one loved.

I’ve been in an unusual phase of life recently. Laurie and I are both naturally slender in our build, but a couple of years ago we both got to the place where we were a whole lot softer around the middle than we wanted to be and we weighed more than we ever had. We had clothes we couldn’t wear because they were too small. So we decided together to aim at slimming down some. We changed our diet a little and focused on smaller portions. Over the next 18 months we both got down to our target weight. If only I had known what was coming. The medicines I am receiving have a side effect of causing loss of weight. They also totally remove my appetite and they wreak havoc with my digestive system. Eating becomes difficult. So I find myself losing weight when I don’t want to. The last round of treatment I lost almost 10 pounds in a couple of weeks. They delayed my most recent treatment to give my body a chance to recover. I had a 3 week window where I felt pretty good and I could eat. In that time my goal became to put on weight, to build back up to a healthier weight. It has been difficult because my body still wants to lose weight due to the meds still working. So Laurie has gone to work trying to fix food to fatten me back up. It’s pancakes swimming in syrup for breakfast, lots of Mexican food for dinner, cookies and apple pie for dessert, French Fries galore. She doesn’t want to eat like that because she doesn’t want to put the pounds back on. But she has chosen to make all this food that has a chance of adding some weight back on because she is trying to serve me. She sacrificed what would be her choice because she loves me. That’s the kind of thing love does.

APPLICATION

There’s much more Paul says about what it means to love. But even what I have described today is a challenging way to live and it is contrary to our natural bent as fallen human beings, for our nearly irresistible bent is to serve self, first, foremost and always. That means to love we will always be swimming up stream, fighting the current. One might ask why we should choose such a difficult way to live. The answer is that while in one sense love makes us powerless, for to love we must give up power and control, in another sense love makes us more powerful than we could ever imagine. In fact, love is the ultimate power. It can conquer hate, cast out fear, and overcome evil. It can heal, both our souls and the souls of others. It is, in fact, the only thing that can heal hearts and overcome evil. At the end of chapter 13 Paul wrote, “These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” In God’s eternal kingdom faith will not be needed, for we will see face to face. Hope will not be necessary, for our hope will be fulfilled. But love will remain. So what can help us love more even today?

REMEMBER LOVE IS WHAT MATTERS

It is crucial to keep ever before us the reality that love is what matters. In the end, if we don’t love we will be nothing. We fall into the trap of thinking that we need to do something important that the world will notice, or we need to be successful in some endeavor, or make a lot of money. None of those things can heal our souls. They cannot heal the souls of other people. They cannot defeat hate and they cannot overcome evil. Only love can.

We need to remember that this is what we were created to do. God has made us so that we will love. The most fulfilling and the most powerful thing we can do is to love others. If we fail to do that, it will be the greatest failure of all. So we should seek to live to the max, and that means loving to the max.

COUNT ON GOD’S LOVE

There are some realities that fight against this call to love others. One of them is that people are not always easy to love. We were at the airport after a flight home and were waiting for our luggage. While waiting I observed a mini drama at the baggage claim area. A man angrily lodged a complaint with the airline personnel. His daughter had some valuables in her suitcase and they were missing. He insisted an airline employee must have stolen them. The airline representative had him fill out a form. The rep told the man it was unlikely that could have happened because no one had gone through her suitcase. They did not do that. But the man was adamant and was not polite about it. He bordered on rude. Then the rep told him he needed to search the daughter’s suitcase again. The man angrily replied they had done that thoroughly. The airline guy said, “We are required to have you search while we watch in order to verify the items are missing.” The man was mad about it, but he proceeded to search the suitcase. Lo and behold, down at the bottom of the suitcase he found the supposedly missing items! The man just started closing up the suitcase. The airline person said, “Sir, is there anything you’d like to say?” A humble apology and admission that he was completely in the wrong would have been appropriate. He didn’t say a thing. He just closed the suitcase and walked away without a word. I was thinking, “What a jerk!” He had been rude and accused the airline people of all kinds of wrong, when he was the problem all along. Not easy to love.

How are we supposed to love when people are sometimes difficult and we are naturally protective of ourselves? Our human efforts to love have a finite tank, and when the needle hits E we’re just out of gas. But what if while we were draining our finite tank, there was a hose from an infinite tank of love continually pouring that love into our tank? Romans 5 says God pours out his love into us.

What drains us is our selfishness. When other people irk us, annoy us, are indifferent to us, are ugly to us, we get hurt, are angered by it. We are not getting from them what we want, so we run out of ability to love them. But when we count on God’s gracious, unstoppable love for us we can be secure. We are safe in him. We have the love we need, and from that secure base we can love them as we ask God to channel his love through us to them.

Laurie and I recently were taking care of our granddaughters when one of them had an epic meltdown. It was completely unreasonable, even irrational, and ugly. It most assuredly was unlovely. We did not stop loving her, even for a nanosecond. That’s because we are all grown up, mature adults, secure in who we are, and we know that our job as grandparents is to love those little kids, even when they are unlovely. That’s kind of how we can love others when we are drawing on God’s love for us and are secure in him.

AIM AT IT

The Super Bowl is today. Patrick Mahomes will play quarterback for Kansas City, and he is remarkable. He makes plays that few, if any can make. That’s so true that he was just named the league’s most valuable player. He has been lauded for making some no look passes, where he completes a pass to a guy he doesn’t seem to be looking at. Seem is the key word. I guarantee he is looking.

When my son was very young and I was helping him learn to throw a football, there was a period where his throws were consistently off target. Finally I asked him where he was looking when he threw. He said he didn’t know. I told him to focus on his target, and quickly his throws started hitting his target. Your throws tend to go where you look.

For us in life, our actions tend to go where we look. If we focus on loving others like Jesus does, not on our desires, our feelings, our selves, we will find it much easier to love. Then all we need to do is choose love. Deliberately choose to love others. God commands us to love, to choose love no matter what others do, and his love for us provides the base from which to do it as well as the ability. Our goal with every person in every situation should be to love.

At every point with every person we have a choice. We can either fulfill God’s plan for us, finding true fulfillment and being powerful, defeating evil and bringing healing to others by love, or we can be an irritating, malfunctioning smoke alarm. Seems like an obvious choice.