

A GOALIE MUST BE ABLE TO STOP PUCKS

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Thrifty Car Rental sponsors an annual Honeymoon Disasters Contest. They get lots of stories. For instance, Paul and Leah Lusk from Idaho were on their honeymoon driving when they had an accident in which Paul suffered a head injury. It was not severe, but it left one problem. When he came to after being briefly unconscious he couldn't remember the accident, couldn't recognize his bride or recall that he had just gotten married. Mae and Kyle of Richmond, Virginia went on a Caribbean cruise for their honeymoon. One night the show on the boat featured a comedian who told jokes about the Titanic movie. That night they were awakened by a horrible sound of metal crunching, followed by the captain's order to abandon ship. Their lifeboat took them to shore on St. Maarten, where the cruise line found them lodging at a nudist colony.

In his book, *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas tells of his friend who boarded a plane and took his seat. Shortly thereafter a young man came and sat in the seat next to him. Thomas' friend asked the younger guy if he was traveling on business or pleasure. The man said, "Pleasure. I'm on my honeymoon." The first man asked, "Your honeymoon? Then where's your wife?" The young guy answered, "Well, the flight is full so we couldn't get seats together. She's sitting a few rows back." Thomas' friend thought that was terrible. The plane hadn't left the gate yet so he said, "I hate that you can't be together on your honeymoon. I'd be happy to change seats with your wife so the two of you can sit together." The new husband replied, "That's okay. I've been talking to her all week."

Uh oh. That's not a good sign for a marriage. Contrast that with the words of writer Andre Maurois who said, "A happy marriage is a long conversation which always seems too short." What a contrast with that young guy on the plane. I am not going to talk about marriage today, but about what makes a marriage work. And that is love. It doesn't just make marriage work. It makes families work, friendships work, the church work and is at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. In light

of the arrival of Valentine's Day this week let's think for a few minutes about love by looking at the familiar words of 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

PREMISE: LOVE IS WHAT MATTERS

Speak with languages of people and even angels. Speaking the language of angels would be a really big deal. I didn't know angels have a language. I thought they spoke English. Paul goes on, have the gift of prophecy, understand all mysteries and have all knowledge, have faith to move mountains, give everything I own to the poor and suffer for the faith. That's an impressive list.

Having the gift of prophecy would be equally amazing. The day before the election in November I had lunch with a friend who asked me what I thought was going to happen in the election. I confidently told him that Hillary Clinton would win big. Perhaps I am not a prophet. I am far from alone. Out of the 20 pro football experts at NFL.com, how many do you think predicted prior to the start of the NFL season that the Atlanta Falcons would make it to the Super Bowl? That number is exactly zero. Out of the 42 pro football experts at ESPN, how many would you guess predicted that Atlanta would make it to the Super Bowl? That number is exactly zero. The same is true of experts at the Union Tribune, CBS Sports and pretty much any other sports media outlet you can name. Clearly the gift of prophecy is in rather short supply. A person who has it would be obvious and remarkable.

What if I could actually forecast the future and was always right? That would be astounding. What if I had faith to pray and actually affect physical conditions on earth? Wouldn't you think it amazing if at some point I had said, "Enough with this drought business. We need rain, so I am going to make it rain" and it happened? In our world the ability to work miracles is in most people's view the pinnacle of being spiritual and having divine power. But Paul said if a person did miracles but without love, that person is nothing. In fact, that individual is worse than nothing. They are a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. Hey, what does he have against gongs and cymbals? Nothing, except if they keep going incessantly they are really irritating.

Last year during the summer the people who owned the house down the hill behind our home did some remodeling. This involved putting in some new flooring. The workers had a power saw set up in their back yard and they used it continually for days. Since it was warm we had our windows open. Now I have nothing against power saws, but when all day long you hear that loud whine and buzz day after day it gets to be really annoying. It's almost like you can't focus on anything but that loud noise. Someone who does really good things, even great and miraculous things, but without love, is like that. They are that annoying.

It is possible to do amazing things, even things that appear self-sacrificial like giving all your money to poor people, for the wrong reasons. Instead of doing it out of love we can do it to create an image in other people's minds, to prove something about ourselves, maybe to get approval, maybe to feel good about ourselves. In fact, all of us have done that very thing at times in our lives. Have you ever been in a group that was going to pray and it became apparent that it was expected that everyone in the group would pray, but you just weren't feeling it? You were distracted, maybe a little out of sorts and just didn't have anything to say. But then you strung together enough Christianese to make up some semblance of a prayer. You were just doing it so you wouldn't look unspiritual. We all know what it means to do something that seems good that is in fact for less than noble reasons.

Certain numbers in math have unique qualities. When you multiply any number by 1, you get that same number. When we had to do multiplication tables in grammar school I loved the 1's. What do you get when you multiply a number by 0? You get 0. So imagine an enormous number, say the national debt, 17 trillion. Multiply it by 0 and the result is 0, which I wish the government could do. Doing any good thing without love is like multiplying by zero. Imagine doing some massively important, hugely impressive spiritual feats. If a person does them without love it's like multiplying them by 0. The result is 0.

Everyone knows that this is true. Down in their gut everyone knows if some religious person is knowledgeable, smart, charismatic, rigorous in their practice,

even a highly successful leader, but they don't love people there is something wrong with their whole act. And that something that is wrong is right at the core of what it is supposed to be. The whole thing is off.

This is a message that is repeated in the Bible. 1 John 4:8 says "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." You may be the smartest knife in the drawer, you may know more scripture or more theology than any other human on the planet, you might be the most scrupulously religious person who have ever lived, but if you don't love people you don't know God.

In John 13:34-35 Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." That is a profoundly important statement. Jesus gave the world the right to look at people who claim to be his followers and judge whether they are for real. And he gave them the standard by which to measure. It is whether they love like Jesus loves. If they don't, they may be a lot of things, but they aren't following him.

By this all people will know that you are a fitness expert. You are in great shape physically. No one is going to want you as a trainer if you're 75 pounds overweight, can barely climb a flight of stairs without having a coronary event, and typically have a doughnut in each hand. No one is going to hire you as an expert financial advisor if you have a total of \$12 in the bank, are two months behind in your rent and drive a 1985 Yugo. I once had a friend who talked about playing goalie in hockey and how he had played quite a bit. He let it be known he was pretty good. The goalie for the hockey team I was playing on at the time had to be out of town for one of our games and the guy who was our usual backup goalie was also not available. So I mentioned this guy to my teammates and they all were relieved and told me to ask him to play. He happily agreed to play for us. Only minutes into the game an opposing player kind of flipped the puck in the direction of the goal. It was barely moving by the time it got to our goalie sub, but it dribbled right between his pads into the net for a goal. That was disappointing. It was really disappointing because my mother could have stopped that shot. But we

figured he would settle down and do better once he got going. He didn't. He let every shot in the Pacific Time Zone go into the net. It was like he went out and recruited shots to go into the net. You'd think if he was a goalie he would at least be able to stop something. His save percentage was zero. I don't think he stopped a single shot. If you're a goalie, you should be able to block at least a few shots. And if you are a follower of Jesus, above all else you will love people the way Jesus loves us. If you don't, you may be a lot of things, but you are not a follower of Jesus and you don't know God.

GOD IS LOVE

Few would argue with the idea that love is what matters. But what is love? There are a lot of different ideas about what love is and what it means to love. Hollywood preaches to us that love is a thrilling romantic feeling that is one of the most powerful emotions we will ever know. It comes on like a tidal wave and takes over our life, but then some time later, like a tidal wave, it recedes. Then we must let go of that relationship and look for another person that will cause that tidal wave of emotion for us. That's one view of love.

Another perspective comes from our world which tells us that if we love someone then we must not just tolerate everything they are and do, we must not just accept it, we must approve of it. If we even hint that we may not approve of something another person does we are deemed to be judging that person and not loving them. That thinking sadly is producing some awful parenting that I observe on an increasingly frequent basis. A parent who actually loves his or her child must refuse to approve of everything that child does, and more than that, refuse to tolerate it. To fail to do that is to set that child's life on a trajectory that leads only to heartache for the child and the parents. It is not love.

We know that love cannot be always approving of something a person is or wants to do. Imagine you have a friend who can't read music, knows nothing about it, has a poor ability to hear notes, even less ability to sing the notes and has voice with the tone quality of a screeching tomcat. What if this person says her career plan is

to be a professional singer and become a star? Oh hey, I saw that person try to audition on American Idol. Is it loving to affirm that?

In his memoir, musician Bruce Springsteen talked about how he grew up. In his home there were no rules. Everything was accepted. At age six he was staying up till all hours of the night, sleeping until three in the afternoon, eating whatever he wanted. It was “love” as approving of whatever he chose to do. He says it was “full license, and a horrible, unforgettable boundary-less love, and it ruined me.” He says as an adult he had to go to therapy to deal with the mess that he was and the poison raging through his veins. There is a part of love that sometimes requires that we not approve of everything a person does. We care enough about a person to tell them a truth they may not like. But then what is love?

GOD DEFINES LOVE

John tells us God is love in 1 John 4:8, but we may not be quite sure what that means. Some people interpret that to say “love is God,” so that God is actually an impersonal force we call love. But that is not what John said and it is not what he meant.

If you asked me, “What does betrayal mean?” I might answer, “Look up the word “betrayal” in the dictionary and you will see a picture of Lucifer Spanos. He is betrayal. He defines it. He is the very embodiment of the concept of betraying people. We could call him a modern day Benedict Arnold, but we’d have to apologize to Arnold for putting Spanos in his camp.

The point is that this is kind of like what John meant when he said, “God is love.” God defines love. He is the ideal embodiment of it. If you want to know what love is and how it acts then look at God and you will know. God is more than love, for he is also holy, just, good, powerful, wise, righteous and merciful. But love is the motive behind everything he does.

Jesus' death on the cross is the model for what love is. Love seeks good for another person regardless of what that person is like or how they treat the one loving. Love sacrifices itself and has no limit. In the case of Jesus, it meant incomprehensible pain and suffering so that he could bring about good for people who were seeking to do him harm at worst, and at best were not very faithful to him.

That love had nothing to do with thrilling feelings. It opposed them when they were doing wrong and told them the hard truth. But then it sacrificed to help them. It was a down deep commitment to undeserving people to do good to them. And that's what love, at its core, is. The throbbing emotions of infatuation are fine, but they actually are self-focused. They are all about another person making me feel good. If we think carefully about that we will see that such feelings are actually about using another person for my personal benefit, not about doing good to another person. That's why they have little to do with real love.

In October Yahoo News carried a story of a building collapse that happened in China. Four overcrowded, badly constructed residential buildings collapsed killing a large number of people. After 12 hours of searching rescue workers were surprised to find a survivor. It was a three-year-old girl. She was found when they removed a thick cement pillar. The little girl's father had covered her and shielded her with his body. He was killed, but she survived with only minor injuries. A rescue worker told reporters, "The child was able to survive entirely thanks to the fact that her dad used his own flesh and blood to prop up a life-saving space for his daughter." That's real love.

To the degree that our love varies from God's unfailing love, the love most clearly displayed in the cross of Christ, our "love" is in fact selfishness in disguise.

APPLICATION

The classic movie *The Princess Bride* claims that true love is the strongest force in the world. Actually that is correct. In their book, *Successful Psychotherapy: A Caring, Loving Relationship*, C. H. Patterson and Suzanne Hidone assert that

psychotherapy is in chaos today. There are many conflicting therapies and a rather poor record of success. They maintain that psychotherapists should focus on one idea. “The essence of all successful psychotherapy is love.” Love is the one thing that heals.

However, loving people the way Jesus loves us is easy to talk about, but hard to do. It is not easy to put yourself on a cross and actually suffer pain for people who may not be deserving of it.

REMEMBER THAT TO LOVE IS WHAT YOU NEED

1 John 4:12 says, “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” Do you get what John is saying there? We cannot see God. No one can right now. But there is a way for people to see God, to learn that he is real and to find out what he is like. That happens when we love one another.

God’s love doesn’t stop with him loving us. It is completed when his love flows through us to other people. I know of many people who have come to faith in Jesus Christ because they came into contact with a group of his followers who loved each other. They begin to experience the reality of our God through the love we have for one another.

We were put on earth to display the glory of God, to make him and his character known. We make his true character known by always loving as Jesus loves. This means that we were put on earth to love. Yes, we all need to be loved, but what we often lose sight of is that one of the main reasons we exist is to love other people. We can only be whole and healthy as human beings as we love other people.

The irony, of course, is that fallen human nature turns everything toward self. So it takes this and turns it into focus on the need for other people to love me. Sadly, we will never find the fullness of life and the health of soul we long for by that route.

It comes through loving others the way Jesus loves us at all times. This is something we need to continually remind ourselves about. We are here to love the way Jesus loves. As long as we are focused on getting something for ourselves or on getting others to love us we will be like a person trying to slake his terrible thirst by drinking salt water. It might feel momentarily good, but will only leave us even thirstier. We only become fully human and whole when we love others, and not just love them, but love them as Jesus loves us.

DRAW ON GOD'S LOVE

1 John 4:7 says, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God." Love comes from God. God not only defines it, he is the source of it. He is the source of all love, every bit of it. If God did not exist there would be no love at all.

This is a reminder of the grace and goodness of God. There are people all over the world who do not bow before our God. Many do not believe he even exists. Yet in his goodness and grace he allows them to experience blessings that come from him. Among those blessings is love. When people experience being loved they are receiving a gift from God, even if they do not know it or acknowledge it.

Do you remember when your kids were little and they would do anything to avoid actually going to sleep? "Read one more book, Daddy." "Can I have some water please?" They were relentless with the delaying tactics. Isn't it weird when you get old that reverses and you will avoid things that might keep you from going to sleep? Anyway, I remember a time when the kids would insist they needed a drink of water, but it couldn't be bathroom water. It had to be kitchen water. Bathroom water, of course, tasted different. We have water that is delivered in very different ways and we use for different purposes. Yes, there is bathroom water, used for washing hands. And there is bathroom water that comes out of the shower and is used for washing the whole body. There is bathroom water that is in the toilet and is used for...well, never mind. There is water that comes out of sprinklers in our yard and is used for nourishing grass and plants. There is water in the laundry room that goes into the washing machine in order to wash clothes. There is water that comes from the faucet in the kitchen that is used for multiple purposes, such as

drinking, cooking, washing dishes. So many different delivery systems and uses for the water at our house. But the key point is it all comes from the same source. There is a water main that brings it all into our house. So, that bathroom water comes from the same place as the kitchen water. Love is kind of like that. It is delivered in many different ways and can look different in its purposes and expressions, but the key point is it all comes from the same source. All of it, every tiny bit, comes from God. If any source of water in our house is somehow cut off from the water main it will no longer deliver water. When our washing machine began spilling water all over because it was leaking we turned a valve that cut off the water coming from the main. No more leak, but no more water in the washing machine either. When we are cut off from God we also cut ourselves off from love as well. In his goodness and providence God pours out love even into lives of those who resist him or rebel against him, but they are only narrowing the amount of love in their lives. If we want to gush with love, be abundant with love, the way we do that is by tying into God's unlimited supply of it.

In order for us to love like Jesus loved we will have to receive his love on a continuing basis. Unfortunately, we cannot give someone something we don't have. Imagine that there is a power outage in your neighborhood. All the lights are out. Your next door neighbor comes to you and says, "We just bought a whole bunch of very expensive steaks and put them in our refrigerator. With the power out that meat is going to go bad. So, could I run an extension cord to your house and use some of your electricity to keep my fridge cold?" You'd think your neighbor is an idiot. You can't give him any power because you don't have any. You cannot give him what you don't have. And neither can you give people the love of Jesus without drawing on it from him yourself.

If we don't depend on God and experience his love a couple of things are going to happen. First, you will try to get love from other people. We have a built-in need for love that is as persistent and as powerful as our need for food and drink. We can survive for a brief time without it, but not for very long. And when we don't have it we try to get other people to give it to us. The problem with this is that when we are trying to get others to love us, we are not loving them. We are using them

Second, you will just give up on loving them altogether. When you find out they cannot give you the love you long for you will tend to just write them off altogether.

This talk about loving people sounds great on Sunday morning. It's not so easy to practice when you are dealing with someone who is selfish, who refuses to give or understand, or even is downright unkind. Yeah, Rick talks about that, but he's not dealing with this difficult person like I am. That involves loving undeserving people, which is what Jesus did. We struggle to muster up that kind of love. It requires something more than what we have. It requires God's unlimited love flowing through us.

Draw on God's love by faith. Constantly remind yourself that God's love for you never ceases. It is abundant, really even excessive, it is unconditional and nothing in all of creation can block it, except our unbelief. So do three things: Count on his unfailing love for you. Second, ask him to fill your soul and mind with his limitless love. Finally, remember he loves that other person with that same unflinching love.

TAKE LOVING ACTION

It is nice if you feel some sort of loving, positive emotion in regard to someone. But what that person needs is for you to actually love them, and that means taking action to love. If Jesus had just had affectionate feelings about us, but had not acted to give himself up for us in order to rescue us, he would not have been loving us.

1 John 3:16-18 says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." We love when we actually give up self to care for people, when we act on their behalf as Jesus acted on our behalf.

Taking action to love may be speaking to a person in affirming words, choosing to be gentle and kind to a person when that individual is not being so kind to you, choosing to serve a person through your actions or express love to them verbally or through a gift. There are uncounted ways that we can love people.

Loving starts with loving the people closest to you, the members of your family or the person you are married to. If you do not love them in your attitudes, words and actions, then whatever you are doing for other people that masquerades as love is actually serving self in some way.

If you are married, start with your spouse. I challenge you to identify three ways your spouse longs to be loved by you. If you can't, then ask your spouse what three ways might be. Then begin doing those three things. I can tell you one that makes a big difference for me. One morning a couple of weeks ago Laurie picked up our granddaughter Ella from her mom and dad and brought her home to spend the day at our house. Laurie said when they got into the garage Ella began saying, "Dadden," which appears to be her word for me. Toby is Da-da, and I am Dadden, for now. She was also looking around. When I came out to the garage where she could see me she broke into a big excited grin and began clapping. I had a really good day that day. A big part of the reason it was a good day was because it started with this precious little girl that we love so much being so happy just because I showed up.

I don't get that a lot, except from Laurie. There is a direct attack on marriage on multiple fronts going on in our culture. We will reap a bitter harvest because of these attacks, but one thing that won't happen is that marriage itself will be destroyed. The dream of marriage and the longing for it are embedded deep in the human soul. Part of the reason for that is we want to know that I am the most important person in the world for at least one person.

Everywhere you go people are longing to know that someone is glad they are there. We can love people by making sure they know that is true. Husbands, God commands you to love your wives. That means giving yourself up for them. Put them first. Learn what makes them feel loved. No, not just loved, but cherished. That's what romance really is: it is understanding what makes this one woman feel cherished, feel like her husband is happy no matter what may happen because this woman is in his life. Wives, love your husbands right back. One of the chief ways you can do that is by affirming them, building them up, not tearing them down.

For all of us, let us never forget that this is what we are earth to do. We are here to love others, regardless of what they do. If we fail to love people, no matter what great things we think we might do, it all amounts to a big fat zero. This is our role in life, our call from God, so let us love others the way Jesus has loved us and will always love us.