

LOVE

Lesson Number Six

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John 13:34 & 35 says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

I John 4:12 says, "No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."

I Thessalonians 4:9 says, "But concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have any one write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another;"

And John 15:13 says, "Greater love has no man that this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Now, turn with me to I Corinthians 13:8 on Page 1000 in your Bibles.

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I Corinthians 13:8, "Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away."

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The New American Standard Version says, "Love never fails." Despite our current economic problems, we still live in an exciting age of progress. Man has split and fused the atom. Princeton University just recently announced that it had demonstrated a pilot scale controlled nuclear fusion reaction. We have tremendous energy at our disposal and we have attained speeds of travel unknown in any other generation.

In 1927, Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic, flying at a speed of about 100 miles per hour and an altitude of 5,000 feet. Today, the Navy's F-14 Tomcat flies 1,500 miles per hour at 60,000 feet. Many of us can still remember when the idea of flying to the moon was just some wild fantasy of science fiction. We have seen more material changes in the last 100 years than in all recorded history, and yet, our big concern is still how to relate to each other successfully.

Too often, we Christians in our churches have not provided opportunity for people to express themselves concerning where they're at and where they're going. The church is a classic example of a situation where we can get together with four or five hundred people or more on a Sunday morning and not really know any of them. We can participate in a truly significant experience with God, without ever really encountering the person sitting with us in the pew. Here at Northbrook Covenant, we are trying to combat that problem through the greeting of each other in the Sunday morning service, the after-service fellowship hours, the small group ministries, and other programs. In many ways, our efforts are working but in others they're not. Most churches are worship centered or project centered, but not many are person centered. The individual Christian often does not experience the kind of community where he can be himself, or where he can confront his fellow human beings in all their weaknesses and strengths. He needs the opportunity for openness and confrontation - a group experience where he can be honest with others and with himself, where he can discuss his doubts, his fears,

his anguishes, his griefs, his frustrations. Christian fellowship is coming to see our humanity and all that it means - the splendor and grandeur of man created in the image of God, as well as his misery; the potential of man in Christ, as well as his sinfulness. If we could get our congregations to be sensitive to the inter-personal feelings and relationships that are so crucial to people, I think we could turn many of our 'sleeping giants' into powerhouses of God's healing love.

The thing that most often causes people to collapse is the lack or loss of meaning in life. People find meaning in many different things: appearance, youthfulness, sexuality, vocation, children, education, pleasure, and many others. But when these meanings are threatened, the person collapses. Life does not allow us the luxury of indulging ourselves in an impoverished past. People need to be encouraged to take the risk of being hurt again, once they have been stepped on or bruised. This can only occur on a lasting level when they can come into contact with the love of God, through his loving people in this world.

The ancient sophists used to say, "Nothing will last." However, in direct contrast, Paul the Apostle tells us that love is sure and lasting. AGAPE love never fails. Does a person who comes into our church sense a real acceptance in love, or does he only hear about it? I myself have always sensed an open friendliness here; it's what convinced us that this should be our church home. Friendliness is good but maybe even more can be added.

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Love never fails. The word "fail" has four technical meanings. The classical Greek presents the picture of a bad actor being hissed off the stage. Of course, love is not like this, as it lives on even on the stage of eternity. Love is never hissed off the stage. The second picture is of a fading flower with falling petals. Love never withers, fades, nor falls away. Love never loses its place. The third picture is that of a child whose lips are trembling as he hands his father a report card filled with F's. Love never misses the mark; AGAPE love always measures up to the standard set for it. Finally, the fourth picture comes from the world of engineering where we see the picture of the steel beam collapsing under a heavy overload. Love never collapses under the load, never falls under the burden.

Paul spoke of spiritual gifts which do fail: prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. The technical definition of a prophet is one who represents God before men. Although they are not usually equipped with the miraculous powers and the ability to make predictions about the future that the prophets of old were, the pastors of our churches still technically qualify as those who have the prophetic gift: they represent God before us and expound his word to us.

The gift of tongues is still with us today. It is not the same as when Peter spoke with one voice at Pentecost and all around heard him in their native tongues. And it is true that Satan has his counterfeits that tear down the faith. But there are still cases where the expression of tongues cannot reasonably be attributed to anything other than a legitimate gift from the Holy Spirit of God.

Knowledge is also a gift of the Spirit which Satan can fake and misuse. But there are true giants of the knowledge

of God and His word who are real blessings to us. In the recent Past, men like C.S. Lewis, Donald Grey Barnhouse, Harry Ironsides, Spurgeon, and many others all fall into this category.

But all these great, church edifying, God-given gifts, Paul said, would terminate. But love lasts. AGAPE love is eternal. Love is the most enduring virtue in this world. When we wish to speak of lasting things, we allude to the everlasting hills and the unchanging heavens, but even these symbols of permanency undergo change. All about us we see the elements wasting under the Powers of corruption. Giant trees, once monarchs of the forest, are now broken and bent with age. All nature groans under this Process of death. Turn with me now to II Corinthians 4:18 on Page 1006 in your Bibles. All nature groans under this Process of death. In the Old Testament, Amos 9:13 says, "...all the hills shall melt." And, in the New Testament, concerning the supposedly unchanging heavens, Hebrews 1:12 says, "...as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed."

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Now, II Corinthians 4:18, "because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

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Where are the lavish, exotic Hanging Gardens of Babylon? They are all gone. Where are the majestic temples of Greece? For the most part, they are broken memories of the Golden age. The great empires of yesterday have been lead to the tomb by the hand of time.

Death uproots and pulls down all creation. Every field has a grave, every city a cemetery. The ugly invader not only turns creation's beauty to ashes but brings the creature to dust. Death darkens the eyes of those we love; it eventually shakes our own limbs, and shuts the door on this life. Mortality reigns in our bodies. Death starts at birth. The mills of time grind slowly - but never forget, they grind exceedingly fine.

In complete contrast, love never dies. Though everything else is mortal, AGAPE love is immortal. When all else fails, love never fails. Love never falls down on the job. It not only never fails, it never ends. Though tongues cease and knowledge vanishes, love lasts.

Jealousy over spiritual gifts had gripped the Corinthian Christians. This is probably why Paul stressed that the greatest gift is love for each member of the body of Christ, no matter how unimportant he might seem. Be assured that he is not unimportant to our Lord who died for him. Love was for the Corinthians; Love is for us too.

Love never fails. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of every characteristic of love that Paul lists in this chapter. Thus, it is absolutely correct to also say that Jesus Christ never fails.

We are all well aware of how most things in life fail. Money fails. Fame fails. The world, writes John, passes away. Sometimes businesses fail. Governments fail. Friends often let us down. Health fails. In fact, everything fails except that which is centered in Christ. Colossians 1:27 is the great affirmation, "Christ in you, the hope of Glory."

The Apostle Peter failed our Lord. He followed afar off and denied Christ on three successive opportunities. He said he would die with Him, but he openly denied his Lord.

Thomas failed. When the disciples spoke of the resurrection he doubted and said in John 20:25, "Except I shall see in his hands the prints of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe."

The disciples failed. After his Gethsemane experience, Matthew 26:56 records, "...the disciples forsook him, and fled." They let him down.

It is comforting to realize that the failure of the disciples did not alter Christ's love for them. Eventually Peter wept bitterly over what he had done. John 21:28 tells us that Thomas cried out, "My Lord and my God" when confronted with the opportunity to complete his demands of verification. The disciples came back for cleansing and renewal. We too fail Him in this day and age. But He cannot fail us for he is God. His love is eternal. I John 1:9 still says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The greatest adventure in life is to experience the love of God in Jesus Christ and to transmit it to others, for then all that we do will be eternal. The mission that he has given us is summed up in John 15:17, "This I command you, to love one another."

I have been to the top of the Sears Tower, the tallest man-made structure on earth. The view is fabulous and the structure itself is a fantastic feat of architecture and engineering, but someday the tons of concrete will be broken and the designer remembered no more; yet a cup of cold water, which you are willing to give in love, will break upon the shores of eternity.

Love lasts. Love never fails. Let us pray daily for this gift of AGAPE love, this experience of containing the Someone who IS love. Let us dare to ask boldly that we may find the greatest marvel of all time, the greatest realization of ourselves. Let us seek humbly the clarity, the openness in our lives that enables our human associates to feel loved by us, and to say in wonder, "God is here!"

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This has been a bit of a head start on next week when we will be discussing AGAPE more thoroughly. But now, let's turn to the Greek PHILEO, which C. S. Lewis translates simply as "friendship". PHILEO is the root from which comes "Philadelphia". Philadelphia is not called the city of brotherly love for nothing. Its name comes directly from the Greek PHILADELPHOS which literally means "fond of brethren".

PHILEO or "friendship" is often not even considered to be a form of love by most people. This is so mostly because few ever really experience it. There is a great difference between friends and companions. Many have companions whom they call their friends but who do not really fulfill the formal definition of friendship at all. The possibility of going all through life without experiencing real friendship is the fact that separates friendship so sharply from the other loves. Friendship is actually the least natural of the loves; the least instinctive, organic, biological, or necessary.

Without EROS none of us would have ever been begotten and without STORGE (or affection) none of us would have been reared; but we can live and breed and raise children without friendship and often do.

Another cause for friendship having fallen into disfavor is the Theory of Evolution. . . . Right now, you're probably thinking, "How is he going to turn the subject of friendship into a diatribe against the Theory of Evolution?" But it really is quite related even if it DOES seem a bit incongruous. Those who see human life merely as the development and complication of animal life consider all forms of behavior which cannot produce certificates of an animal origin and of survival value to be decidedly suspect. And friendship's certificates are not very satisfactory in this regard.

Still another problem is that friendship is a relationship between men at their highest level of individuality. Those who place the collective whole above the individual (which is true of most politicians and commercial advertisers even in this "land of the free") find it reprehensible because it is not "democratic". Friendship is seen as selective and as an affair of the few. To say "These are my friends" implies "Those are not."

And we also today have to deal with that nasty bit of filthy theory which contends that every firm and serious friendship between members of the same sex is "really" homosexual. The dangerous word "really" is the nastiest fly in the ointment here. To try to say that every such friendship is consciously and explicitly homosexual would simply get you laughed at: it would be clearly false to the most casual observer. No! Much better to insinuate that it is "really" - unconsciously, cryptically, in some deep and not understood sense - homosexual. And, of course, while those who say such things can never prove them, we can never fully refute such allegations either and that's what makes them so dangerous and reprehensible.

Of course those who make such spurious accusations are not the least disconcerted by the lack of any evidence to support their allegations. They cheerfully announce that such is certainly expected. All such palpable evidence is carefully hidden and protected in the deepest recesses of the psyche. That's about like arguing, "If there were an invisible cat in that chair, the chair would look empty. The chair looks empty: Therefore there is an invisible cat in it."

A belief in invisible cats cannot perhaps be logically disproved, but it certainly tells us something about the wierdo that holds the belief. Those who cannot conceive of friendship as being anything more than a disguise or elaboration of EROS betray the sad fact that they themselves have never had a friend. The rest of us know that although it is possible to have erotic love and friendship for the same person (I myself count my wife as both lover and friend) yet in some ways nothing is less like friendship than erotic love. Lovers are always talking to one another about their love; friends hardly ever about their friendship. Lovers are normally face-to-face, absorbed in each other; friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest. Above all, EROS (while it lasts) is necessarily between two only (A menage a trois or an orgy

is a sex act, not a function of EROS). But two, far from being the necessary number for friendship is not even the best. And the reason for this is important.

Charles Lamb said that if of three friends (A, B, and C), A should die, then B loses not only A but A's Part in C, while C loses not only A but A's Part in B. In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. Now that John is dead, I shall never again see Bill's reaction to one of John's special jokes. Far from having more of Bill because I now have him all to myself, I actually have less of Bill as a result of John's death. Hence true friendship is the least jealous of the loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth, if only the newcomer is qualified to be a real friend. To be qualified, the newcomer must of course share the interest that binds the friendship together. Because, of course, a friendship must be about "something". But, more on that in a moment.

As I said a few moments ago, friendship and companionship are not the same thing. Companionship is the matrix in which friendships develop but it is not the same thing as friendship.

In early communities many years ago when civilization was just beginning, the cooperation of the males as hunters or fighters was no less necessary than the begetting and rearing of children. A tribe where there was no taste for one would die out no less surely than a tribe where there was no taste for the other. For all of recorded history, men have gotten away from women to do things together by themselves. They had to. And to like doing what must be done is definitely a survival trait. Men not only had to do these things, they also had to talk about them. They had to plan the hunt and the battle. When they were over, a debriefing session was necessary to draw conclusions for future improvement. This was fun. The cowards and bunglers were ridiculed and punished and the star performers were praised. Details and technicalities were hashed over minutely. Basically, the men talked shop. This is companionship.

This companionship is, however, only the matrix of friendship. It is often called friendship, and many people really are only talking about their companions when they refer to their "friends". But it is not friendship in the fashion intended by PHILEAS.

Friendship arises out of companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one!" It is when two such persons discover one another, when they share their vision - it is then that friendship is born. And instantly they stand together in an immense solitude.

Lovers seek for privacy. Friends find this solitude all around them, this barrier between them and the rest, whether they want it or not. They would be glad to reduce it. The first two would be glad to find a third. The companionship on which the friendship supervenes may be a common religion, common studies, common profession, or even

common recreation. All who share it will be our companions, but one or two or three who share something more will be our friends. The man who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our friend. He need not agree with us about the answer to the question.

Notice that friendship, PHILED, thus repeats on a more individual and less socially necessary level the character of the companionship which was its matrix. All the companions are traveling the same path but the friends are on a different kind of journey. Thus we picture lovers face to face but friends side by side; their eyes look ahead.

That is why those pathetic people who simply "want friends" can never make any. The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides friends. Where the truthful answer to the question "Do you see the same truth?" would be "I see nothing and I don't care about the truth; I only want a friend," no friendship can arise - though affection of course may. There would be nothing for the friendship to be about; and friendship MUST be about something even if it is only an enthusiasm for dominoes or white mice. If it's not about something, it may be a very deep and special affection (and there's nothing wrong with that) but it's not really a friendship.

Friends are also more than just allies. A friend will of course prove himself to be an ally when necessary. He will lend you money, take care of you when you're sick, and even stand with you against your enemies. But, when the pinch is over, the friend will not give it a second thought and will want to immediately get back to more important things. The friend who shares your penchant for rare coins will stop to run you to the hospital to set your broken arm. But when he comes to visit you in the hospital, you don't talk about his kindness in doing that; you talk about rare coins of course.

This love, this PHILED, this friendship, free from instinct, free from all duties but those which love has freely assumed, almost wholly free of jealousy, and free without qualification from the need to be needed, is eminently spiritual. It is the sort of love one can imagine between angels. Have we here found a natural love which is Love itself?

Before we rush to any such conclusion, let us beware of the ambiguity in the word "spiritual". When "spiritual" is used pertaining to the Holy Spirit, "spiritual" is, by definition, good. But when "spiritual" is used simply as the opposite of corporeal, or instinctive, or animal, this is not so. There is spiritual evil as well as spiritual good. There are unholy as well as holy angels. The worst sins of men are spiritual.

The subject that a friendship is about need not necessarily be a nice one at all. Friends may share a strong enthusiasm for God, but they may also conversely share a strong enthusiasm for the Devil. This group of friends may delight in supporting a home for wayward girls. This other group of friends may delight in seducing and debauching wayward girls.

And friendships can become exclusive to a degree not warranted by what they are about. Friends naturally turn somewhat of a deaf ear to those who don't share their



vision. The inventors of the transistor simply didn't have time to pay much attention to what their colleagues were saying about advances in vacuum tube technology; they were on a completely different wavelength. But the partial deafness has the danger of becoming a total deafness, and a wholesale indifference to others in general.

A sense of innate superiority then arises and being a member of the group somehow makes one "better" than those outside the group. The friendship takes on a quite horrible special nature. We think we and our friends are special for the simple reason that we chose each other. But, in fact, a few years more difference in our dates of birth, a few more miles between our houses, the choice of one university instead of another, or any number of other differences, and we would not even have been acquaintances, let alone friends.

For Christians, of course, the meeting of friends cannot be construed to be by chance. Nothing happens to a Christian by chance. God is in control of every aspect of our lives. Christ, who said to the disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christian friends, "You have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another." The friendship is no some sort of reward for our discrimination and good taste in finding one another: It is the instrument by which God reveals to each the beauties of all the others and is the mechanism he has designed through which we can edify one another in Him.

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Next week, we will begin our exploration of the real and true love of God: the AGAPE love that sacrifices itself unselfishly for the one it loves. Let us pray together before getting down to the discussion of cases.

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