Text: I Corinthians 13:1-4
Title: "The Spirit Way…The Way of Love"

INTRODUCTION

SCROLL I CORINTHIANS 13:1-8a ONSCREEN

Can you imagine what our church would be like if we totally did things in the spirit of these words? Can you imagine what your family would be like if these words drove every thing you said and did? Can you imagine what your life would be like if those words were the focus and the power of your life?

So out of the heart of the apostle, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, comes what many consider to be the most beautifully profound description of love found in all the literature of all history … I Corinthians 13.

> But Paul's teaching on love, inspired not by a gooey love relationship, but actually out of a broken heart over how unloving people in the church were acting, shows up here in I Corinthians 13. It is sandwiched between chapters twelve and fourteen, important teaching on the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church. Here is a church that is literally eaten up with division, fighting, feuding and conflict … and out of this comes the most powerful description of love ever recorded.

We've been talking about "The Spirit Way," the life of the Spirit of God … giving us the life we've always wanted and the power we've always needed. And here we will see that the Spirit Way is the Way of Love.

> **Galatians 5:22 (NIV) - But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,**

One of the evidences that I am walking in the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, is that I will be a person who loves others.

ILLUSTRATION – It's really hard to know how much air is in the tire on your car. But you can take a little device called a tire gauge and press it on the valve stem of your tire and you can gauge how much air is in the tire. It's really hard to know if that steak you're cooking on the grill is rare, medium or well-done. But you can take a little device called a meat thermometer and poke it into that steak and see just how hot it is on the inside, and how well done it is. It's really hard to know how much gas is in the gas tank of your car. But on the dash there's a gauge lets you see with your eyes what's the real situation in a part of the car that you can't see.

> You know, when it comes to what's in our heart, particularly our relationship with God, and our love for God, sometimes it's hard to know what's in there. How full of God's love are we? How real is our love for God? But did you know that the Bible gives us just such a gauge.

1 John 3:14 (NIV) - <u>We know</u> that we have passed from death to life, <u>because we love</u> our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

Today, I want you to take I Corinthians 13 off of the beautiful placard in the Christian book store. I want you to take it off of the sweet little book mark that you have in your Bible. I want you to take it off the unity candle at a wedding. I want to help you bring it out of the sentimental and into the practical, because this is where it belongs … in the sometimes messy and unloving activity of people who are supposed to be followers of the God who is love. Today and next Sunday we're going to dig into this and see if we can't find the answer to why there is so little real love in the marriages and families of Christians … and in the churches where Christians belong.

There's a pretty identifiable outline to I Corinthians 13:

1. **THE <u>PRIORITY</u> OF LOVE (vv.1-3)**
2. **THE <u>PARTICULARS</u> OF LOVE (vv.4-8a)**
3. **THE <u>PERMENANCE</u> OF LOVE (vv.8b-13)**

This morning I want us to see the priority of love.

Now, in I Corinthians 12 Paul wrote the church about appreciating the diversity that God has designed by His Spirit in the church. All the spiritual gifts are essential, and necessary for the church to accomplish its mission, the mission of Jesus, in the world. And I Corinthians 12 ends with these words:

1 Corinthians 12:31a – "But eagerly desire the greater gifts…"

> Now the NIV probably misses the real meaning of this statement. I don't think it is a command that Paul is making ("*Eagerly desire the greater gifts…*"), but rather a declaration. He probably means more like, "*You* eagerly desire the greater gifts…" It is not a command, it is a rebuke. He's saying, "You eagerly desire the greater gifts, but you don't appreciate the lesser gifts that are just as essential in the Body of Christ."

Then Paul goes on to correct them: **1 Corinthians 12:31b – "And now I will show you the most excellent way."**

And the most excellent way is the way of the Spirit … the way of love.

You know, there's a great debate among churches as to what is the primary quality that ought to be exhibited in churches … doctrine (that's important), truth (that's important), programs (certainly needed) … relevance (that's important). What really is the priority? You cannot read the NT without coming away with the unmistakable conclusion that love is the priority … "Love is supreme" as the great hymn reminds us.

Galatians 5:6 (NIV) - The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Just think about the words of Jesus…

John 13:34-35 (NIV) – "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. [35] By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

How does the Lord want to "market" the church? Not primarily with promotional gimmicks, but authentic love in the fellowship of the church. I tell you, when people come to a church and experience the love of God through the love of people, it's like a magnet. People flocked to Jesus because they felt His love. And that love is the greatest thing in any church.

The word for "love" here is a powerful word. It's not the word *eros* that could have been used. You can tell by the sound of that word that it refers to sexual love. This word is never used in the NT. Paul doesn't use the word *phileo*, like he does in other places in the NT. That word means family or friendly love. No, the word Paul uses here is the word *agape*. And it is a sacrificial, selfless love. It is an active, giving love. This is the John 3:16 kind of love.

The difference between agape and eros is like the difference between love and lust. Someone has said that love can't wait to give; lust can't wait to get.

ILLUSTRATION – Erwin Lutzer of the Moody Bible Church told this story: "I was preaching in the Midwest one day, when a woman came to me with a little girl at her side. This woman showed by the cast on her arm and some scars on the side of her face that she had been in the hospital. She said, "I was in the hospital because of a very serious fire. There were burns over two-thirds of my body. My husband walked into the hospital room, took one look at me, and said, 'You're not the woman I married.' He left her to marry someone younger and more beautiful." Lutzer went on to make this application: "Human love says, 'As long as you stimulate me, as long as I can be proud of you, as long as you're beautiful, I can love you. If you change, my love for you changes.'"

So Paul begins his instruction this way:

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

1. WITHOUT LOVE I <u>ACCOMPLISH</u> NOTHING <u>HELPFUL</u>.

In the Corinthian church there was this great esteem placed on the vocal gifts. That's what Paul was referring to when he speaks of one who speaks in the tongues of men and of angels. He may have been referring to the oratory skills of the prophets in the church. Maybe he's thinking of the spectacular display that occurred when someone in the church began to speak in tongues.

And the point here is that if I have these great gifts of speaking (preaching, teaching, speaking to others), but it doesn't flow out of a Spirit-filled heart of love, it accomplishes nothing good. There are no good results that come from this kind of ministry.

Words without love … words not spoken out of a heart of God's love for others really don't accomplish anything helpful. In fact, the Bible says, **"I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."**

> Scholars believe that this may have been a reference to how the pagans worshipped around the altar of the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. They made lots of noise, but it didn't help anyone.

ILLUSTRATION – "Clanging cymbal…" Do you know how annoying a cymbal crash is? It's one thing if you hear it with the rest of the band or the orchestra, but by itself????

> I wonder how many words of husbands to wives are like a clanging cymbal. How many words of parents to children are like this? How much of the hallway chatter at church is like this? How many sermons or SS lessons come off like this? How many songs come off like this?

Anything done in the flesh, apart from the Spirit, and therefore apart from love, is nothing but noise and confusion. Without love I accomplish nothing helpful.

1 Corinthians 13:2 (NIV) - 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 have not love, I am nothing.

2. WITHOUT LOVE I <u>AM</u> NOTHING <u>SIGNIFICANT</u>.

Here he refers to the spiritual gifts of prophecy, and perhaps wisdom ("fathom all mysteries…), and knowledge, and faith.

> The Corinthians thought that people with these spectacular gifts were really something. But in fact, if I'm exercising any gift, performing any ministry with any other motivation than to simply love, I am nothing.

I may think because of my gifts and stature in the church that I am something, but if my ministry doesn't flow out of a Spirit-filled heart of love, I am really nothing. This has to do with reputation.

As a believer, I can walk around like I'm large and in charge, but if my heart isn't filled with God's love for other people, I'm really a nobody.

1 Corinthians 13:3 (NIV) - If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

3. WITHOUT LOVE I <u>GAIN</u> NOTHING <u>IMPORTANT</u>.

This has to do with rewards and the benefits that come to me when I do things for other people.

"If I give all I possess to the poor…" may be a reference to the spiritual gift of helps or service. And if so, this is an unheard act of generosity.

Note: We have a wonderful benevolence ministry where we distribute food and clothing, and other essentials to people with needs. You walk into that building on the days when they are distributing food, and you can feel the love. And you can be sure that the people who are receiving the help sense that they are not just getting a "hand-out." They know when that sack of groceries comes with a sack of love. And they know when someone is just going through the motions handing out sacks without love.

"Surrender my body to the flames…" would be the ultimate act of sacrifice or worship offered to a pagan god. And many people did exactly that. But Paul may have in mind here the sacrificial act of devotion by a believer to be burned as a martyr for Christ.

Actually this kind of persecution didn't happen until later in Christian history, but we're told that in those days some Christians actually sought out this kind of martyrdom as a way of becoming famous or of gaining some extra heavenly reward.

If that's why you do what you do for God and for his people … SORRY. There's no benefit, no reward, no profit that is gained when we minister without a Spirit-filled heart of love for God and for others.

There is no reward, no gain, in this kind of sacrifice because there is no love in it. However, when I give myself away in acts of service and sacrifice for others, purely for their wellbeing, then I am blessed.

CONCLUSION

People know when the ministry and the service coming at them is motivated by love, or by some selfish motivation.

ILLUSTRATION - In the summer of 2003, David Timothy bought an old van with 265,000 miles on it, with the help of his wife and a friend. They dubbed it SoupMobile and started taking food to the homeless of Dallas, Texas.

Timothy had wanted to open a soup kitchen for a long time, partly because he grew up poor and hungry, though never homeless. In the name of Christ, SoupMan, as he came to be called, provides over 3,000 meals each month. He takes donated food from some restaurants and grocery stores, and devotes 60 to 70 hours a week in this ministry to the poor.

One homeless woman said, "He does things for us that other people would not do, like bring us food, clothes, water, juice, cakes, dog food, blankets…" He manages to find toys for homeless children on their birthdays.

Another homeless man commented, "He don't have to come out here, but he come out here because he got God in him."

That's it! That's what the world needs to see; that's what the church needs to experience. When we serve and minister out of a Spirit-filled heart of love, others will know we "got God in us."