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Title: Love Is Everything...or Not

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Scripture: [1 John 4:7-12,19](#)

Text: [1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:3](#)

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You've got this. You still have time. Valentine's day is five days off. Love seeking shoppers shell out more than \$27.4 billion each year. That makes Valentine's Day the second-priciest holiday on the calendar for U.S. consumers. Annually, 30% of flowers are sold around Valentine's Day. Not surprisingly, 58 million pounds of chocolate will be purchased. Greeting cards still make up 1.3 billion dollars of the total. The newest gift trend is for your pets. Americans on average spend \$12.12 for a gift for their pet, their goldfish, cat or dog. All of this in search of love.¹

Despite our need to glorify romance and the sensual on the 14th, it has little to do with Saint Valentine. The only clear account that remains of the 3rd-century priest's life tells of how the Roman Emperor Claudius II personally interrogated him and tried to persuade him to convert to Roman paganism (or die). Valentine refused and tried to convert the emperor to Christianity instead, eventually dying a martyr's death. Valentine's story doesn't have much to do with roses, chocolates, and heart-shaped doilies; it has more to do with real love. That's the focus over the next few weeks. But just what is love?²

It's an important question because the Bible talks about it a lot. If you read the New Testament with any degree of care, you find that again and again we are called to be people of love. Jesus said that we are to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...and we are to love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:13) On his last night, he clarifies the challenge, offering a new commandment which was simply "Love one another." When you do, Jesus told them, you'll be recognized. "...everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." (John 13:35)

One of those followers listening to Jesus at the Last Supper was John. In the first letter which bears his name, he says, "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." (1 John 4:7a) Because John recognized this is a subtle, hard-to-understand point, he says it again, backward. "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1John4:8) Then, to drive home the challenge he says, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:11)

Another disciple listening to that night was Peter. Peter wrote things like, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8). Paul wasn't in the room listening to Jesus talk about love. But he picks up on the challenges. He told the church in Rome that we must not owe a thing except the debt of love. He told the Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit, the evidence of God's working in your life, is first of all love. And of course, he wrote the church in Corinth about love. Perhaps the most famous statement on love is found in his first letter to the church in Corinth, the 13th chapter. We are going to study it over the next three weeks in hopes that we can answer that question, "What is love?"

But before we start that, I want to say a word about the context of this famous passage and the church that first received it. First Corinthians 13 is often called the love chapter. That's because it has been read at more weddings than any other passage of scripture. By a show of hands, how many of you had it read at your wedding? How many have ever heard it read at a wedding? Everybody. But the irony of this there is nothing sentimental or romantic about it. It has nothing to do with an intimate relationship. It was written to a fussy church that needed to discover what love is.

The church in Corinth was a mess. I know that for some that is hard to imagine. We have this idealized view of the Bible and the first Christians. But the reality is people are people no matter if they were in the first century or the 21st century. There was lots of posturing going on about who was the greatest Christian. You can see it in the very first chapter when Paul calls them out, literally names the names of people who have ratted out the congregation. People were bragging about who baptized them as if being baptized by Paul was somehow better than being baptized by Apollos or Cephas. Baptism had become a credential rather than a cleansing, like a degree from Harvard or Yale to brag about.

There were all kinds of economic snobbery going on. The community had some people of means and some people without. And they were having fellowship dinners where some people were eating high off the hog and others had next to nothing. The results were arguments over the selfishness of these church gatherings.

And there was a big fuss and fight about spiritual gifts and the view that some gifts are better than others. Some were interrupting gatherings by speaking in tongues, more as a way to show off than to praise God. Others were bragging about how smart they were or how visionary they were because they had the gift of prophecy. You get the point. There was a lot of "I'm better than you because I've got this spiritual gift." It was just a mess

so Paul spends the entire 12th chapter dealing with it, trying to resolve the arrogance, fighting and quarreling about spiritual gifts. The 14th chapter deals with the very same stuff. In between, we find the 13th chapter, the love chapter. Paul didn't interrupt his train of thought and to write a passage for wedding ceremonies.³ He wrote a passage about love to a very unpleasant church filled with difficult people who were egotistic and self-serving, resentful and bitter filled with envy and comparison. So, in the middle of dealing with this problem, Paul writes these amazing words: "And yet I will show you the most excellent way." (1 Corinthians 12:31a)

What's the most excellent way? Love. The roses, chocolates and red boxer shorts with hearts kind of love? No. That would be *eros*. The Greek world had several words for love. *Eros* was one that was very common in the ancient world. We translate it in English as sexual passion, erotic love. However, it was used in a much wider sense by the Greeks. It spoke to the kind of love that is found when you have a moving experience, like standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon and being overwhelmed by the view. Or watching your team come back and win the Super Bowl in the last two minutes like Kansas City did last Sunday. What a rush! Or the emotions of hearing Beethoven's Ninth Century. Wow. *Eros*.

Our society puts a great deal of emphasis on this kind of love. It why we spend so much money on Valentine's Day. The Greeks used it a lot too, but the word is never used in the New Testament. This is probably because of its association with pagan worship to describe the rush people had worshipping pagan gods. When Paul says to this cranky crowd of people, "I'll show you a more excellent way", he did not say *eros*.

He also didn't say *phileo*. That was the most common word for love in the ancient world. *Phileo*. It is used to describe the garden-variety love—the love you have for friends, for people in your family, for your country. You see this word tied to other Greek words, words like *delphus* (where we get "Philadelphia," the "city of brotherly love") or *anthropas* (where we get "philanthropy," the love for human beings).

When Paul says, I'll show you a more excellent way, he uses the word *agapao*--*agape*. Paul, along with Jesus and all the other writers in Scripture—uses the word *agape*. They use it a lot, over 200 times. What is strange about this word is that it's seldom used outside the Bible. Classical scholars say it is only used four times outside the sacred writings of the Scriptures, and each time it's a rather anemic word that is translated "goodwill." Yet biblical writers take *agape* and baptize it into the Christian faith. It is the major word that is used to describe God's love for us, our love for him, and our love for each other.

What characterizes this kind of love is that it's not primarily a love of the emotions. *Agape* love is a mindset, an orientation of the will. *Agape* love determines that it will seek the highest good for other people. This is why Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, can say, "Love your enemies" or "Pray for those who persecute you." Jesus isn't talking about the "feeling kind of love" of Valentines. You can't command that kind of love. *Agape* love isn't primarily about feelings. It is a mindset. *Agape* love seeks the highest good for other people. It is something we have experienced and therefore, something we must offer. ⁴ Or as John says, "We love because he first loved us."

This is the most excellent way and if you have it, you have everything. If you don't, you have nothing.⁵ Love is everything or not.

That's the first thing Paul wants messed up, bragging, prideful, quarrelsome people like us to know. So he says to them and us: "If you speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, you are just noisy, like a gong or a clanging cymbal. And if you have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if you have all faith, to remove mountains, but do not have love, you are nothing. If you give away all your possessions, and if you hand over my body so that you may boast in your suffering, but do not have love... nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, paraphrased)

It doesn't matter how much you know. It doesn't matter how much you have. If you don't have love, if you don't agapao, you have nothing. It the thing about love. It's an all-in commitment--everything or nothing.

Does everyone know what a GOAT is? I'm not talking about the four-legged farm animal with a beard that will eat just about anything. I'm talking about the acronym G.O.A.T., the greatest of all time. Most people think that the acronym got started around Mohammed Ali, who likes to say he was the greatest. GOAT is used a lot these days.

Like last month's epic television event, "Jeopardy! The Greatest of All Time." Anybody here watch it? If you did, you know that the three highest money winners in the long-running game show's history, Ken Jennings, Brad Rutter, and James Holzhauer, faced off to see who was the greatest of all time, who was the GOAT. Alex Trebek hosted it. I guess I should offer a spoiler alert, just in case you recorded it on your DVR but haven't gotten around to watching it. Everybody thought it was going to be a close competition, but it really wasn't. Brad Rutter was simply lost in the competition; he couldn't do anything. James Holzhauer won one game. Ken

Jennings dominated, won in four games, won 1 million dollars, was clearly smarter than the other two and now has the title GOAT.

But Paul says, "You could be the smartest guy in the world. You can win everything. You can have it all, you can be the GOAT but if you don't have love...so what?" In other words, I can have everything, do everything, know everything, and win everything, but without love it's nothing. Love is everything or it's not.

That's what Paul is saying in the opening words of this chapter. He goes on to describe love in a powerful way. We're going to unpack that next week. But this week, I hope you will take this home with you. Love is everything. Or it's not.

You can be the greatest of all times, but without love, you are nothing. Why? Because the actual greatest of all times is love. You know this. It's why you are here. The Bible is a love story and the summary of the plot is this. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...the greatest of all times was sent not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through his love." This is why. "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19).

So, go ahead, love. You've got this. Love, because it is everything.

¹ <https://wallethub.com/blog/valentines-day-facts/10258/>

² COLSON, C. W. Against the world for the world: our love is most godly when it is both. **Christianity Today**, [*s. l.*], v. 54, n. 2, p. 57, 2010.

³ Ortberg, J. "Everything-Love=Nothing" May 5, 2019. Menlo Church.

⁴Robinson, Hadden. What Is This Thing Called Love? Retrieved by subscription @PreachingToday.com.

⁵ Ortberg.