The Greatest of These Is Love…

Prayer for Illumination

Spirit of life, God of love, open our hearts and enter in, that hearing your word of love, we may become your love for others. Amen.

You’ve heard me say before that

I believe there is a difference between a believer and a disciple.

To give you a comparison, I think of a believer like a newborn baby and a disciple like an mature adult.

The newborn stage of spiritual maturity is characterized by the universal needs for love, nurture, relationships, fellowship, and family, with one significant difference, newborns are totally dependent on others. Newborns are very needy…they demand that others feed them, they cry whenever a need is not met and stop crying only when someone else meets their needs. They demand unconditional love and attention.

In other words, it’s all about them.
We all start out as newborns when we begin our spiritual journey…
there’s nothing wrong with being a newborn,
but God does not expect us to remain a baby.

Newborns are primarily found only at worship and fellowship activities.
Receiving nurture is their goal.
But as curiosity develops in newborns,
their desire to learn brings them into the child stage of exploring and learning.
People move from the baby to child level by showing an interest in becoming more involved and desiring to learn more than the worship service has to offer.

Spiritual children are characterized by being playful, curious, asking questions, wanting to be "big" and explore, yet wanting to stay in touch and be in a safe, comfortable environment, just like a child as they grow.
Basic lessons in the child stage include learning to listen and obey, learning manners, rules, and good behavior… in other words, learning how to play nicely.
Spiritual children are found in groups that offer opportunities to learn.

As spiritual children learn to obey what they are studying in scripture, they begin to shift from what they want to do, to obeying what Christ desires for their lives.

The scriptures and small group studies provide answers to child stage curiosity and promote health and growth.

The indicator of readiness to move from the child to teen spiritual level is less pleasant and typically demonstrated with a sense of restlessness, dissatisfaction, and the feeling that something more is needed. One becomes bored and begins to look for something more challenging.

In the teen stage one is attempting to find one’s own identity. And it is often identified with rebellion, "doing my own thing with my own crowd," as one seeks to find purpose and meaning distinct from “parental” values.

Spiritual teens combine great ability with great inconsistency. They desire excitement, adventure, and a desire to take risks.
Spiritual teens experience intense, roller coaster emotions from the tension of seeking to try new things and wanting the comfort of the familiar at the same time. Teens are critical of self and others.

Spiritual teenagers need challenging discipleship, peer community and subtle adult supervision. In time as they learn to trust God, they develop maturity, consistency and emotional stability. Spiritual teens need to learn what their gifts and strengths are; they need to discover their purpose in life and their spiritual calling; it’s like discovering a spiritual career.

As spiritual teens mature and find their place, they evolve into servants, seeking to serve, not be served. They develop highly committed relationships and begin to invest in the life of a few, they become “parents” and nurture newborns, children, and teenagers as they seek to grow and mature.
When you think about it, Jesus spent the majority of his time with the 12 disciples;
He nurtured them, taught them, and challenged them as they grew and matured from newborns, to children, then to teens, and finally into mature spiritual adults.

I think it is important that we acknowledge the process of spiritual newborns, children, teenagers, and adults and be intentional in our personal maturation as we seek to mature into spiritual adults, as we seek to become disciples for Jesus Christ.

Over the last several weeks we have talked about being baptized and the receiving of the Holy Spirit, the need to be attentive to the teachings of the Bible, and the spiritual gifts God has given us. Today we are going to look at what an adult Christian or disciple might “look like”.

I believe our text today speaks of the attributes of a spiritual adult.
One has gone from the mentality that it is all about me and my needs, from curiosity mixed with the need for security, from the struggle of finding one’s place in ministry…living out one’s faith, to the desire to be “more like Christ and less like me” as they then seek to nurture others in their spiritual journey.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (CEB)

If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don’t have love, I’m a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and I know all the mysteries and everything else, and if I have such complete faith that I can move mountains but I don’t have love, I’m nothing. 3 If I give away everything that I have and hand over my own body to feel good about what I’ve done but I don’t have love, I receive no benefit whatsoever.

4 Love is patient, love is kind, it isn’t jealous, it doesn’t brag, it isn’t arrogant, 5 it isn’t rude, it doesn’t seek its own advantage, it isn’t irritable, it doesn’t keep a record of complaints, 6 it isn’t happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. 7 Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.
Love never fails. As for prophesies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end. We know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, what is partial will be brought to an end. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child, think like a child. But now that I have become a man, I’ve put an end to childish things. Now we see a reflection in a mirror; then we will see face-to-face. Now I know partially, but then I will know completely in the same way that I have been completely known. Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love.

In this passage, Paul speaks about the supremacy of love,
the character of love,
and the endurance of love.

This text reminds us that there are some things more important than being right or powerful or honored.

There are things more important than religious talk, knowledge, faithfulness, and sacrificial giving.

Paul tells us that without love, all of these things add up to nothing.
Those who think they have gained everything by standing on principle, dominating others, or by being right, have lost it all if they do not have love.

Do you believe that God is the creator of the world?
Do you believe that Jesus Christ is His only begotten Son, and that He came into our world and lived a sinless life, and that He died and was buried and on the third day rose again?
Do you believe that He is now at the right hand of the Father, and is preparing a place for us, and that one day He will come again?
Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is our guide and counselor and comforter?

If you believe all these things, then you could very easily be a newborn in the Christian faith. But the Bible teaches that if you believe all the right stuff, but you do not have love that’s not enough.
Because even faith is of no value unless it is backed up by love.
In verse 1, Paul says that love is more important than spiritual gifts.

In verse 2 he says that love is more important than knowledge.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:1, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

I don’t think we need more knowledge near as much as we need more love.

Paul goes as far as to say that love is more important than faith.

Can you believe that?

Now he doesn’t say that faith is not important.

He just says that love is more important than faith.

He says, "If I have a faith that can move mountains,

but have not love, I am nothing."

Paul says love is more important than generosity.

Paul says, "If I give all I possess to the poor...

but have not love, I gain nothing."

You see, generosity is not enough.

If the only reason that I give is to receive or to benefit myself,

then love is absent, and giving is empty.

The motive for giving should be love,
love for God and love for God’s people.

Then he says that love is more important than accomplishments. In essence Paul is saying that even if you go to church every time the church doors are open, if you read your Bible faithfully, if you pray, and do all the things that a Christian person ought to do, but there is no love behind it all, then it is nothing in God’s sight.

You might be a spiritual child or even a teenager but without love you have more maturing to do. You are not yet a spiritual adult.

You see the problem is we tend to think that love is something that just happens to us because that is what the world teaches. You fall in love or you fall out of love. You can’t help it.
It is something that just happens to you.

But the Bible teaches that love, God's kind of love, is something we choose.

God commands us to love each other.

Which means, I can choose to love you, and you in turn can choose to love me.

Now, what kind of love is Paul talked about?

In Philippians 2:4 Paul says that he wants us to behave as Jesus Christ behaved.

In other words to love in the same way that Jesus loved.

And here is the way Jesus loved.

He said, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

In other words, love becomes unselfish.

You begin to think about other people and their interests just like you think about yourself and your interests.

You become more concerned about their needs than yours.
For example let’s start with your spouse.
You ought to love your husband or your wife first and most.
You ought to be kinder, more tender, more gentle to them
even if they’re behaving like a jerk.

Think about it, if you did this there wouldn’t be any arguing or bickering,
because you would feel their interests are just as important as yours.
And pretty soon it would filter down to the relationship you share with your children,
maybe even your in-laws and your out-laws
and everybody else in the family;
just because you love them.
Then it spills over into work, friendships, other relationships,
even into church.
In fact Jesus said, "By this they shall know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another."
You see love is the way the world will find out that the message of Jesus Christ is real.
There is a story about a missionary named Doug Nichols that I want to share with you because I think it illustrates what I have been trying to say this morning. Doug Nichols went to India, but while he was just starting to learn the language he became infected with tuberculosis and had to be put in the hospital.

It was not a very good place to be. It was not very clean and conditions were difficult because of the sheer volume of patients. Wanting to make the best of a bad situation, Doug decided to take a bunch of Christian books and tracts and try to witness to the other patients.

But when he tried to pass out tracts and books, no one wanted them. He tried to tell them about Jesus and his love, but not knowing the language was a huge barrier and he quickly became discouraged. It seemed that because of his illness, the work that he had been sent to do would not be done.
Every night at about 2 o’clock Doug would wake up with chronic coughing that wouldn’t quit.

And one night when he woke up he noticed across the aisle an old man trying to get out of bed.

The man would roll himself up into a little ball and teeter back and forth trying to get up the momentum to get up and stand on his feet. But he just couldn’t do it. He was too weak.

Finally, after several attempts the old man laid back and wept.

The next morning Doug understood why the man was weeping.

He was trying to get up to go to the bathroom and he didn’t have enough strength.

So his bed was a mess and there was a smell in the air.

The other patients made fun of the old man.

And the nurses came to clean up his bed, they weren’t kind to him, either.

In fact, one of them even slapped him in the face while the old man just laid there and cried.

The next night again about 2 o’clock Doug started coughing.
He looked across the way and there was the old man trying to get out of bed once more.  

He really didn’t feel up to it, but somehow Doug managed to get up and help the old man stand.  

But he was too weak to walk, so Doug took him in his arms and carried him like a baby.  

He was so light that it wasn’t a difficult task.  

Doug took him into the bathroom, which was nothing more than a dirty hole in the floor, and stood behind him and cradled him in his arms as the man took care of himself.  

Then he carried him back to his bed and laid him down.  

As Doug turned to leave the old man reached up and grabbed Doug’s face and pulled him close and kissed him on the cheek and said what Doug thought was `Thank you.’”  

The next morning there were patients waiting when Doug woke up and they asked if they could read some of the books and tracts that he had brought.
Others had questions about the God he worshiped
and His only begotten Son who came into the world to die for their sins.

In the next few weeks Doug Nichols gave out all the literature that he had
brought,
and many of the doctors, nurses, and patients came to know Jesus Christ
as their Lord and Savior.

Doug later said, "Now what did I do? I didn’t preach a sermon.
I couldn’t even communicate in their language.
I didn’t have a great lesson to teach them.
I didn’t have wonderful things to offer.
All I did was take an old man to the bathroom and anyone can do that."

You see, "People will not care how much you know,
until they know how much you care."

Is such love humanly possible?

As an individual character trait or a personal attitude, no;
but as the presence of the Holy Spirit living within you,
guiding and directing your life,
as the love Christ, most definitely…

Love is… patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking, not easily angered, not keeping record of wrongs, not delighting in evil, rejoicing with the truth, protecting, always trusting, always hoping, always persevering, never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

I invite you to take some time this morning to be in prayer,
ask God to pour God’s loving Spirit upon you,
to show you the areas in which you lack love,
and help you to yield these to God
as you intentionally seek to become more like Jesus.

PRAYER God of love, I do remember that there are more important things than being right, being powerful, or being honored. More important than our spiritual gifts, more important than knowledge,
more important than faith,
more important than generosity,
and more important than all the things that we might accomplish for the kingdom of God. Increase in us the stuff that life is made of – faith, hope, and love, but especially love – that we may love like you and abide with you eternally through Jesus Christ, our lord. Amen.
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