

Walking down the hallway over at Northridge Elementary School I was on my way to monitor the end of year tests for fifth grade. You see a lot just walking into an elementary school. In the office was a mother who I knew when she worked at Office Depot. She was picking up her daughter for an appointment. We talked a bit, but her concentration was distracted by her daughter's arrival. In the cafeteria 1st grade students were eating lunch. Their teachers hovered giving instructions on clean up and the proper way to sit. In the hall further down was a class lining up. One student dashed out of line to hug the teacher. As I passed I could just barely make out that student saying 'I love you' and the teacher responding with the same.

Each of these is an example of love: sweet, caring, touching moments. They stood out against other moments on the same walk through the same school. In one classroom the teacher was loudly making announcements to a group of talking students. Up the stairs a teacher walked and talked with a young boy about how he wasn't listening and being disrespectful. And in the classroom I was monitoring there were moments the students seemed to disregard the teacher completely. Each of these so sad, so common, and maybe unfortunately so accepted. These were examples of the exact opposite, love not on display.

Same school, same day, some moments of love and some lack of love. Love is talked about so much, in songs, in books, on TV, that we may think we've got it all figured out. Yet for so many love is elusive, hard to find, and sometimes even harder to hold on to that you may realize you don't have the first clue. Either way the Apostle Paul in the second lesson has some things to share with us about love.

What things do you do really well? What talents do you possess, abilities you've discovered, something you excel at? (*pause*) You might be like a guy I read about this week. A highly successful business contractor, he's purchased a Mercedes, a Rolex, and membership into three exclusive country clubs. Beautiful wife, three healthy kids, and he lives in a huge house. His family vacations all the time. He's turned his abilities into success in a spectacular way. Accomplishing the spectacular is great. If you're like this guy it seems you've unlocked the key to success.

Paul was writing to a bunch of Christians who seemed successful. They were in a thriving community with a growing group of believers and a host of unique blessings from God. These Corinthians were so well off Paul wasn't writing to encourage them to discover their gifts. They already knew them. There were other problems. **"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...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...if I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love."** Their gifts sounded pretty impressive and spectacular. They prophesied, gained knowledge, and seemed to have a strong faith. Like the guy success was right there. But the guy I read about wasn't happy. It was all action with no heart. The Corinthians used the gifts, but they had no love.

If you heard that your best friend was in the hospital, even though it'd mean time away from work or home, you'd want to be there at the hospital. You might even spend time buying a get well soon card. Depending on your relationship you might get a stuffed bear or some flowers. You'd drive the miles to the hospital, search to find a parking space, wait and take the elevator to the room, and walk in. After all that who could argue that you love the person. Everything looks great, looks like you're doing your part to show love to your friend. But what if the entire time you just kept checking the clock or peering at your phone? What if you calculated the total dollars spent and estimated how much you cost yourself in fun? What if you talked nonstop about yourself? **"Have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal...but have not love, I am nothing...but have not love, I gain nothing."** Without love all my best works, all your best works, are nothing. God doesn't even consider them as good.

Love is, this. Instantly that blank gets filled with words: happiness, rewarding, satisfaction. It's a feeling, a strong emotion that can't and shouldn't be stopped. That means if I love ice cream, I should be happy and get and eat ice cream whenever I want. It means if I love my job, then I will be rewarded based on the number of overtime hours I can work or the extra shifts I'm willing to take. And if I love another person and they're the only one who can satisfy me then rules don't matter. I should do whatever it takes, even ditching a current relationship, to be satisfied. No one can deny me because it's love. Love starts in me as a desire for something or someone. They might be beautiful, a resource, a key to my pleasure. And I love them if they love me back. That's more about my feelings and less about the object of my love. It's more about what I get and less about what I give.

Yet Paul said love is, **"patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."** You probably have an example good and bad of each. Maybe we remember best the stories where we didn't experience that kind of love. A spouse we have to tell for the second, tenth, or fiftieth time about something that bothers us. Or when a friend talked about what you shared privately. Or when the car cut you off, the person held up the line at the store, or the rude mechanic didn't care to give you any personal attention. In these moments, when love isn't coming our way, can we be kind, keep no record of wrongs, be not easily angered? It's not within the confines of an easy going home life or job site that our ability to love is measured. Rather when we're distressed and facing difficulty that's when we still need to be not self-seeking, not rude, not selfish or stubborn. Not just with a spouse, but friends, coworkers, classmates, neighbors, and everyone else too. That isn't easy. Who can show love when no love is being shown to us?

Have you ever heard of agape love? Agape is one of four words for love in Greek. Try saying it, agape. Now you know a Greek word. Each of the four has a slightly different meaning. There is brotherly friendship love, intimacy love, and love between family members. Then there's agape. That love is all about the object of the love. Not because they're lovable. It's a choice to love, to not give to get, but just to give. That love asks questions. What are their needs? What can I do to serve them? How can I seek their best interests? Agape love is selfless concern for others and not caring one bit about getting anything, even love, in return.

So Paul said, **"Love never fails."** That's not directed at you. That's not another encouragement or worse a command to achieve. It isn't your love, but God's love. God's agape love. Everything around us fades. My love fades and fails like a flower that didn't get water or sunshine. Prophecies, tongues, knowledge will even fail. None last forever. Only love lasts forever. Not your love, or my love, but God's love. **"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face."** Imagine holding up a piece of shiny metal to do your hair in the morning or to check yourself. You could do it, but it would be a poor image. God's love isn't poor. The fact we're on this sinful world keeps us from seeing clearly God's perfect love. Even though the reflection is poor, we know what God wants us to know and that's enough to be saved. Though dimmed and muddled the message is there. God shows his agape love clearly in Christ.

Christ lived the love that Paul talks about, agape love. Jesus told his disciples in the gospel he would be with them only a little longer. It was because the greatest act of self-sacrificing love was about to start. His agape love came in spite of your record of wrongs. Jesus paid for those wrongs with his agape love, making the choice to love you and forgive you. God the Father made the selfless choice in love to send Jesus. Never self-seeking but always doing miracles for someone else, and seeking only the path that led to suffering. He didn't delight in evil, he rejoiced in the truth he established. The truth that you are perfect in God's eyes because of Christ's perfect love for you. It wraps around you and embraces you. Christ's love brings you from darkness to trust in him. Christ's love gives you hope today for eternity to come. Christ's love strengthens you to persevere in faith. God sent Jesus because only Jesus could love you enough to take the abuse and die anyway. Only Jesus could love you enough to give himself for you with no expectation of getting anything. Only Jesus could love this way because God is love.

This is the ideal. Love this way. Jesus said it in his new command, **"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."** That's Christian love motivated by Christ alone. Loving others who aren't always deserving. Loving those who hurt us, who turn their back on us. Love this way finds the ability and success because of our Savior. His actions in your life, his death and resurrection for your sins, his glorious promises for you change the way you live and love. We exercise love now. You look out for other's best interests, seeking ways to serve them, to show love this way. And the only way to love this way is to keep going back to Christ's love. Fill up on his love in his Word. You are loved by Christ and filled by his Word you will love God's way.