



If you've ever done any baking you know that all it takes is one missing key ingredient to make a recipe fall flat. We have lots of young children in our household. So, when we dish out scoops of oatmeal they'll devour it with delight. But that's only because the right ingredients are there. All it would take is to leave out the sugar and you can be sure that no matter how good the oatmeal looked or how nutritious it was, it would be totally rejected without the sugar. Some people are this way with coffee and their sugar or cream. And to me it's amazing how some white rice can go from pasty goo to delicious with just a hint of butter and salt. I'm sure you get the point: without some key ingredients some foods can end up being totally rejected. What about when it comes to our spiritual gifts? Is there a key ingredient that we dare not drop out? This morning we continue our series asking, "What does it mean to be spiritual?" and we look at the later portion of 1 Corinthians. We see that to be spiritual requires one crucial aspect. It is a key ingredient when it comes to spiritual maturity: love.

Paul has led us to see the importance of using our various gifts to work together as a team. But simply working together on a team with your spiritual gifts isn't the end all. The Christians' goal isn't merely to achieve great service or accomplish great feats. In fact, Paul helps us to understand that isn't what really matters. What matters most is love.

Firstly, without love all we might do or accomplish is totally useless. "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 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 do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing." The Corinthian Christians were able to boast quite a bit about their gifts and accomplishments. They were a gifted congregation with people who could prophesy, teach, work miracles, heal the sick, and even speak in tongues. But Paul reminds them that it was all worthless if not done in love. What good was it if someone had the amazing ability to speak in the tongues of angels, all knowledge, or prophecy but didn't do it out of love for others? It was just noise. So it is today. It doesn't matter if you are a seminary professor, senior pastor, the top of your class, or life-long parishioner in a conservative church body who knows the Bible end to end by heart. If you fail to speak in love, it is worthless. It doesn't matter if you are the most dynamic and intelligent teacher or a parent who spends hours a day training their children. If you are a condescending teacher or parent, you have accomplished nothing good. And even if you were to take all your possessions and give them away to those in need it would be worthless without love. You might say, "Isn't giving people what they need loving?" Yes. But whether you give them knowledge or food it's worthless without love. What good is it if you give to the poor but do it so that you can receive praise or some sort of payback? What good is it if you give, serve, or teach only to make yourself look better than others?

This isn't just Paul's estimation or a human perspective. It is how God sees our spiritual lives. God doesn't care how smart you are or how much you give to others. He cares more about the attitude of your heart and the motive behind your giving. Paul is basically saying it is better to be a teacher who doesn't know everything but loves their student than to be a know-it-all who doesn't love those they teach. It is better to be a pastor serving with limited gifts but loving those you serve than to be the world's greatest preacher who doesn't have real concern for those under their care. In our worldly mindset this doesn't always make sense. We might say, "We'll at least I'm the best!" Important leaders demand respect and honor. But not so with God's church. He doesn't care if our church is the best at its programs and has a full Sunday service and a huge budget. He cares about what drives us as a congregation to do our ministry. Is it love? If love is missing all else fails.

I'm running a 200 mile relay race with a team of twelve other runners in just under two weeks. It means over 24 hours of passing off a running bracelet and cheering on other runners. It's a big deal for many people. As I was looking over the race rules I found some startling things. Apparently all it takes is just one of the twelve runners on your team to get your team disqualified. And it isn't too hard to do that. All that needs to happen is just one of those runners fails to follow the rules and the whole team can get disqualified for the whole race. A team could be running it's best pace and leading the whole event, but if one runner fails to wear the proper reflective safety gear the whole team for all twenty four hours of running would be disqualified. The whole team would have pretty much trained and ran and spent all that time for nothing but a disqualification. That's what Paul is talking about when it comes to failing to love. All it takes is just one mean glare from one member of a church body, and every other act of love and kindness and sharing of the gospel that morning can be lost and for nothing. All it takes is a single slight, a single loveless act, to ruin not just hours of work, but years of training and teaching. A Christian pastor or teacher could spend a lifetime trying to be the best evangelist they can be, but if they fail to love, they have failed in all other areas of ministry. Without love all other gifts and efforts are useless -like oatmeal with sugar they will be rejected by those around you, and ultimately esteemed by our God as a worthless.

Now, if love is such a key ingredient to being spiritual, it would be important to define it. Paul has already defined it as more than just what we do. It is what is behind all we do. If a pastor gives countless hours to counseling or visiting church members in need, but complains about those people behind their backs and speaks condescendingly about them, what good is his service? If on the one hand you volunteer to help the poor, but on the other hand tell others, "They wouldn't be

homeless if they weren't so lazy," what good is your volunteering? What you do matters very little if it is not done with love. Love is an attitude behind an action. Love is a response that comes from concern and respect for others.

Paul goes on to define love with great detail here in a beautiful way. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." Doesn't our standard for love often fall short of this definition. How many times will you work with others when they don't measure up to your demands? Love is patient. How often don't we fail to notice the concerns of others because we are so caught up in our own? Not love. Love is kind. And when someone is more well-off than us what happens? We get envious and compare. Love doesn't. When we accomplish something we might demand recognition. Love doesn't need to. Love does not boast. And don't we like to feel good about our accomplishments? Love is not proud. It considers others just as important. When we see others fail we sometimes might be quick to gossip. Not love. Love does not dishonor others. The first person we often think of in the morning is ourselves. Our goals for the day often reflect that. Love is not self seeking. It makes all its goals in light of serving others. Do you get irritated when someone does a small thing like forget to take out the garbage or leave their dirty clothes on the floor for you to pick up? Love is not quick to anger. And what about when you need to forgive someone? Do you say, "I forgive you" only to bring out a list of that person's failures every time you get the chance? Love keeps no record of wrongs. And when someone you don't like suffers harm, does it give you just a little satisfaction? Love never rejoices in evil but always in truth. When's the last time you failed to speak up for someone's good name when others were gossiping? Love always protects. When's the last time you failed to take someone's actions in the kindest possible light? Love always trusts. When's the last time you despaired and gave up on someone? Love always hopes. When's the last time things got so hard in life that you just tossed love out the window because you were just fed up? Love always perseveres. This definition of love is beautiful and true.

But it also shows us the times we failed to include the key ingredient to being spiritual and failed to serve others in love. If this is what it means to truly love, who can say they have loved? Paul is right when he says that we now only see in part and understand in part. We can't even begin to really grasp what love is. How can we include it in our lives? I look at this list and can only say, "God how can you love someone like me who doesn't even fully get what love really is?"

But when I wonder that I also fail to fully get who God really is. The Scriptures use this word to define God. God is love. With great patience he dealt with his creation. In loving kindness he provides us with life and all we need. And instead of seeking his own glory he gave it all up and lived a humble, lowly life for us. In love he came to remove the record of wrongs that stood against us. All our loveless acts were washed through his loving kindness. And the measure of love he had was to give up his Son. And the Son's love was so limitless he not only gave to the poor and surrendered his body, he did it purely out of love. He gave his blood to cover us and save us from loveless guilt. When it had him shaking with his soul overwhelmed to the point of death, he didn't give up. Love persevered. He did it to rescue us from the hellfire we deserved for our selfish hearts. And he demands nothing in return. This is a love that will never fail us as. He moment his forgiveness removes every sin. And he continues to deal with us in great patience, forgiving all the way. His love will endure forever. "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever." Our God will in love bring about the greatest act as he brings these bodies out of the grave into eternal life and love. Love will remain and love will hold us together forever.

Love, you see, has a lasting impact. Other spiritual gifts will fade and diminish in distribution and in use. Their purposes will come to an end. Everyone with knowledge or any other gift will soon be forgotten. But those who understand and hold to love will have a lasting impact on the lives they serve. Right now we only see in part the way things will really be in the end. Paul compares it to looking in a mirror verses looking face to face. In his time mirrors were often imperfect metal surfaces. To go on living without love in the picture is to miss what really matters. It is to be like someone who is still a child in thinking and understanding. But to mature spiritually means to take love along with you in all that you do.

Sometimes the key ingredient to success is something we are quick to toss aside. When NASA first prepared to put people into outer space it had to make some incredible feats. Every aspect of the planning as mission critical. The engineering of the rockets, spacesuits, and all the equipment was extraordinary. Even the food took some good planning. They had to provide the right food that would last long enough and help the astronauts healthy. Some scientist planning the mission were insightful enough to understand that merely packing the nutrition and calories wouldn't do. In order for the food to truly be useful it still had to be enjoyable to eat. And so, when people first went into outer space and faced some of the harshest environments and biggest challenges, the mission planners included something you might think was non-essential: chocolate pudding. You'd hardly label chocolate pudding as mission critical. But when those astronauts back then and today spend weeks or months eating in outer space it makes a huge difference. It's one small thing that helps make the meals edible and keeps them strong and healthy. So it is with love. We might be quick to toss aside love as nonessential. The bottom line can be merely accomplishments and the things we can boast about. Love isn't always seen as important as knowledge, achievements, or strength. But those who have love will be the only ones with something that will last and endure.

And you don't have to make it to the moon to make a difference. Our God shared the greatest act of love by coming down to us from heaven. In us, his loved people, love is what is behind even the smallest acts, from a needed word or smile, to a simple visit, or even a small bowl of oats. What does it mean to be spiritual? You include the key ingredient: love.