

Preserving Unity Through Love

by Jesse Barrington | 2018 Fellowship Conference

Brother Geoff Thomas spoke to us last night about the privileges of the Christian.¹ And he mentioned to us that privileges come with responsibilities. And so I'll be speaking more on the responsibilities that we have in the Christian life.

If you'll open your Bibles to the first letter to the church at Corinth in chapter 13. I want to begin by stating a concern that I see. It's a concern that's repeated in Scripture in numerous places. And it's a concern that's prevalent in the church today. The concern pointedly is this: *How do we handle our differences in our local churches?*

I have a concern that we all too often view ourselves much more spiritually mature than we really are. And the evidence of our immaturity is revealed in our lack of love towards one another, demonstrated in how we respond to one another and handle our differences in our local churches. I'm concerned this is especially true for us in the reformed church in the area of doctrinal differences and in the area of how we live out our convictions in our lives. Reformed churches and reformed Christians are known for their focus and their emphasis on doctrine and truth. And praise God for that. That is commendable.

Let me say from the start, every Christian and every true church should be known and marked for their careful attention to right doctrine. I mean, after all, the Scriptures tell us that the church is a pillar and buttress of truth. Most of you who are here in the churches represented here are in those because you love doctrine and truth. You're in those churches because the pastors of those churches unashamedly proclaim truth, uphold truth, and defend truth, and the whole counsel of God.

Beloved, we should thank God for those pastors. We should thank God for those churches, for those Christians who long for truth, proclaim truth, and defend truth. Over the years, I've gotten to know many of you here. I know that you're a people who individually study doctrine. Your desire is to glorify God and you want to take the truths of Scripture and apply them in all areas of life and be ever conformed to the Word of God for the glory of God. But we must be careful. At the same time that we are in our pursuit of truth, and the application of truth - individually and corporately - as local churches, that we don't fail to heed a very important call in Scripture. And that is to maintain the unity of the Spirit in Christ. This unity of the Spirit that we have in Christ is wonderful. It's what we love to

¹ <https://illbehonest.com/the-privileges-of-the-christian>

experience when we gather together in fellowships like this. It's that unity of Spirit that we've all had where maybe we are on a plane trip somewhere and we sit down next to someone, and we begin a conversation, and we feel a bond to them. We feel a oneness with them, and as we go further in the conversation, we begin to realize, this is a brother or sister in the faith. And we may not even know their name, but we love them and we're drawn to them. We even want to be with them. This is that oneness of spirit that we have in Christ.

Know this, church, the church of Jesus Christ is united together supernaturally. We are not called in Scripture to create unity. Do you know that? We are called in Scripture to maintain and preserve the unity that God Himself has created in us. Maintaining our unity in Christ is vitally important because the church's unity is a living witness to the lost world about the saving and uniting power of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, through the gospel, brings together a diverse people - a people from every nation, tribe, tongue, and language, and makes them one in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we are one body. We are one spirit. We have one hope. We have one Lord. We have one common faith. We have one common object of our faith and affection of our hearts and that is Jesus Christ.

In our churches; in our families of faith our unity though is tested. It's tested in the midst of our diversity. When I speak of diversity, I'm not just speaking about cultural diversity here. Although, there is cultural diversity. The diversity I'm speaking about is the diversity, maybe, in maturity in Christ. Or, our growth in the understanding of truth and doctrine. Or, the diversity in our convictions and how we apply the Scriptures to our lives. How we live out those understandings.

So what do we do? Do we just set doctrine aside? Find the lowest common denominator? And just rally around that? Of course not. Of course that's not what we do. We do see that happening in some places; some of the professing churches who set aside doctrine for the sake of unity, which is a fake unity. But no, we don't set aside doctrine. Again, the church is the pillar and buttress of truth. We must all be consistently growing, understanding, defending, and proclaiming truth. We must be conforming to truth personally in our lives. We must maintain that unity that we have in Christ and the witness that we have to a lost and dying world.

So let me summarize it in one question and put it before you, and then try to answer it for us. How do we as local churches here with such diversity maintain our unity in Jesus Christ while we vigilantly pursue and defend truth. That's the question I want to put before us today. And I think Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, he gives us the answer.

Let's read 1 Corinthians 13. Please follow along as we read God's holy and inerrant Word.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things; believes all things; hopes all things; endures all things. Love never fails. As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child; I thought like a child; I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see dimly in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully even as I have been fully known. So now, faith, hope, and love abide these three, but the greatest of these is love."

I'll be focusing on verses 1-7, and I won't even be able to cover them all in this short period of time. In verses 1 - 3, I hope to convince us all of the essential need for love in our local churches in the midst of our differences. In verses 4 - 7, we will look at the picture that Paul paints for us, which is nothing less than a portrait of Jesus Christ Himself. And I believe that we will all look at this portrait of love; this portrait of Jesus Christ, and I think we're all going to see that we are falling short. What we will all see is that the genuineness and the depth of our love towards one another may be found lacking. And I think we're going to discover that we're not quite as mature as we think we are. As Paul said, when he was a child, he thought like a child. He reasoned like a child. He's talking about the maturing process.

Beloved, I think many of us think that we're men or women, but by how we handle our differences in our local churches, we're proving to still be children. Well, it's no secret that the answer to how do we maintain our unity in Jesus Christ in the midst of our diversity in our local churches is love. Before we walk through these verses, I don't know about you, but I find it very interesting that the greatest treatise on love in the entire Bible is not written to a man and a woman standing at an altar with rings in hand about to exchange vows. But it's written pointedly to a local church. A local church - and we've all read the book of Corinthians who no doubt is in the face of diversity; has some differences. And the unity that they have supernaturally in Christ, right now is at stake in this local church. And I will tell you, that's true for all of us sitting here right now.

The context again is that this is written to a local church who had experienced wonderful fellowship in their union of Christ. And now that fellowship, that unity in Christ, is in danger. Look at verse 1. *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."* We know from chapter 12 that there is a division sprouting up in the church of Corinth over spiritual gifts. They're priding themselves in what gifts they have. It seems people are creating what you might call subcultures within the church. Based on what? Based on what spiritual gifts they have. They're creating spiritual hierarchies within their local church it seems. Different classes of Christianity. Treating some people with preferential treatment or elevated treatment over other people based on which gifts they have.

Well, Paul will have none of that. In fact, in chapter 12, we know that he spent time straightening that out. He helped them all see that the body of Christ is one body with many different parts. But the gifts within the church are distributed by God, and we're not to boast in those, and they're to be used for the edification and the building up of the church as a whole. But here in chapter 13, Paul says something different. Paul says essentially you're finding your identity in believing that you are something; believing that you have something to offer based on what gifts God has given to you. *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."* What is it that Paul's doing here? Well, please know this, beloved. Paul is not minimizing the importance of spiritual gifts in the local church. He just spent an entire chapter letting them know spiritual gifts are important and vital to the local church.

Well, if he's not minimizing the importance of spiritual gifts, what is it that Paul is doing here then? He's maximizing the necessity of love. Paul is not minimizing the importance of gifts, but maximizing the necessity of love. He's essentially saying this, if you have gifts - even the ones you're all boasting about - the gift of tongues maybe, but it's not rooted in love; it's not used and governed by love, then your gifts do not help the church. They distract from the church. They hurt the church. Verse 2. *"And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."* And I think is where we'll focus our time. This is where we in the reformed church with our emphasis on doctrine seem to struggle a lot. Praise God again that we study doctrine, and we seek to live it out and apply it in all of our lives. That's something we must be doing. But for many in the reformed church, understanding doctrine has become everything to them. At any time I begin to discuss this type of subject, like Paul's discussing here in v. 2, it's not long before I hear from someone, *"Jesse, you're minimizing doctrine, and doctrine is from God's Word, and we can't minimize doctrine."* So let me say loudly

and clearly, and I will repeat myself throughout the entire sermon, I'm not minimizing doctrine. I agree with you. All of doctrine is of vital importance because it comes from the Word of God. I'm not minimizing doctrine. I'm not suggesting that we set doctrine aside. As a pastor, I'll tell you this. I've given myself to doctrine. To the study of doctrine. To the teaching and preaching of doctrine. To the defending of doctrine. Week after week, year after year. I'm not minimizing doctrine. But I'm maximizing the need for love. The need for love in our doctrine. The need for love in our doctrinal differences.

Look what Paul is saying here. *"If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge..."* All mysteries. One of my favorite portions of Scripture is in Luke 24 after the resurrection of Christ on the road with the disciples. He's speaking to the disciples. And Jesus unlocks all mysteries for them. He helps them to see how He is the fulfillment, and how all of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jesus who understands all mysteries. What a value that would be to the church! To have an individual or people in our church who understood all the mysteries in Scripture and how they find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. What about the one who has all knowledge? Deep doctrine. This may be the person who has all the covenant issues sorted out perfectly. They have all their eschatology down. Paul says here they have all knowledge. He's giving them credit. You understand all mysteries. You have all the knowledge. But if you have not love, you are nothing.

Again, I think this is where the rubber meets the road for many of us churches represented here. There are some of us who believe we have all the mysteries and knowledge figured out. And I think if we're honest, we need to confess we don't have it all figured out. We're all still growing. These men who have walked in the faith years faithfully, you could bring them up here one by one and they would acknowledge, listen, I'm still growing. The Word of God is still sharpening and shaping my understanding of who God is. The mysteries are still being unlocked to me. The knowledge and the deeper things of the Lord are still being revealed to me. And praise God, we never stop growing. But what Paul says here is, what if you did understand all the mysteries and have all the knowledge? Even then, without love you're nothing. In verse 3, Paul goes on to say this: *"If I give away all I have and deliver up my body to be burned and have not love, I gain nothing."* Again, I've talked to so many of you. You're living self-sacrificing lives so you can be more faithful to Scripture and give more. I mean, aren't you the kind of people you want to see in our church? The ones who are gifted by God? The ones who have and are studying doctrine and have knowledge and understanding? The ones who are living sacrificially for the glory of the Kingdom of God? Aren't these the people we want in our church? And the answer is yes. And don't they bring

value? Don't they help edify and build up the church? And the answer is maybe. But maybe not. Do you see the progression that happened in these first three verses? Without love, we accomplish nothing. Without love, we are nothing. And without love, we gain nothing. What's the conclusion that we must come to? In measuring our Christian maturity, if we have everything without love, we have nothing. We have nothing. Love is essential. Oh, how important the use of gifts are in the local church. Oh, how important doctrine is in the local church. Oh, how important sacrificial living is in the local church. But apart from love, beloved, it's nothing.

Right away, some of you may begin to struggle as we talk about doctrine and begin to ask a question like, "*So, are you saying that we should let go of doctrine and pursue love?*" And I want you to know this: *No. It's not truth or love. It's truth in love.* So often, we have that pendulum swing in our life, don't we? Where, okay, I'm pursuing truth. I'm given to truth. I'm studying. I'm reading systematic theology. I'm going through all these things. I'm growing in truth; growing in truth. And we begin to neglect other areas of our life, and you realize, wait a minute, I'm lacking in love. So what do we often do? We overcompensate and we set truth down, and we walk over here and begin to pursue love. Saints, it's not truth or love. It's truth in love. It's not 50% of truth and 50% of love. It's 100% of truth and 100% of love working together. It's not either/or; it's both/and.

Well, it's at this point that some of you may say, okay, I'm pursuing truth, and I believe that I'm loving. But you may believe that you're loving because all too often, we find - especially in reformed circles - statements like this: Of course, I'm loving. I told them the truth. That's the most loving thing you can do. Well, it is loving to share truth with people. But Paul now in verse 4 is going to help you see what does love look like actually lived out. He's going to help us see that love is not just sharing the right, correct doctrine, but the spirit in which you share that doctrine is vital.

Here's what Paul's going to show us. *The genuineness and depth of our love is not seen in just sharing truth or how we respond to people who agree with our doctrinal positions, but the genuineness and depth of our love is revealed in how you respond to people who disagree with your doctrinal positions.* What I keep seeing in reformed circles is people pursuing truth. And typically as I begin this discussion, I'll see them pursuing truth as it pertains to doctrines that we would call non-salvific. Meaning, we're not usually struggling in the areas of whether Jesus is God or we're saved by grace through faith alone. We're dealing in doctrinal areas that although very important and vital because they're from the Word of God, that we know that some through the ages have disagreed upon and come to different

conclusions upon. And that's kind of where I want to focus my effort and energy today if I could.

Someone begins to study a doctrinal position. Maybe they were unaware of it. It wasn't even on their radar before. They become passionate about truth, as we all should be passionate about truth. Well, they begin to talk with others in their local church about this truth because they're excited about it. They see how God can be glorified in it and through it. And this is good. But then they find someone in the church or different people in the church who disagree with them. And it's at this point that I begin to see that unity that we have in Jesus Christ - that supernatural bond that we have - this is where I begin to see a disunity. Not a working to preserve and maintain that, but a division beginning to occur. And I see the divisions occurring really in two different ways.

One of the divisions that may occur is they say, *"Well, if you're not going to side with me in my beliefs, I'll just go find another group of Christians; another church who more believes in these areas the way I believe, and I'll go be with them."* But another division I'm actually seeing more likely happening, and probably more prominent in our churches represented here is a division that stays in the local church. And what this division looks like is this: When I find someone who doesn't agree with my new study of doctrine or my new arrival of understanding, or I find someone who doesn't live out their convictions the same way that I do, there's division within the church. And that happens by treating other Christians in the church who disagree with me as second-class Christians. *"You're not as spiritual as I am." "You clearly don't love holiness and God as much as I do." "There's something wrong with you, or you would come to the same conclusions I have come to." "You would live out your convictions the same way I live out my convictions."* This person that we once had such intimate fellowship with; that we shared the joy and union of fellowship and union in Christ together - my brother and sister in the Lord - someone who, like me, has been blood-bought, now, I realize has come to a different conclusion in an area of doctrine, and I don't even treat them like a brother or sister anymore. I want everyone in here to know, especially myself is this: that's not loving. That works directly against our call to maintain the unity that we have in Jesus Christ. I see this played out in churches all the time. Maybe you come to a conviction about how you should educate your children. Something that never was even on the radar. And then your eye diffused that quickening ray in the dungeon. And the light came in and Christ became real. And then everything in your life began to look through the lens of the gospel and the Scriptures as we should do. And you've come to convictions you've never even thought about. *"How should I educate my children?"* And you arrive at a conclusion. I think the best way for me to live this out might be for me to homeschool my children. And then you

become convinced that's the only way that you can educate your children if you're seeking to glorify God. And you begin to look at other people who don't follow the conviction that you follow there. And you begin to categorize them in your mind. *"They don't love Jesus like I do." "They're not willing to make the sacrifices that I'm willing to make."*

Do you see the spiritual pride? Do you see the classes of Christianity beginning to divide? Do you see that the basis of our fellowship, which was once the sweet union of Jesus Christ and the gospel, now becomes the basis of: well, how do you educate your children?

What happens when we do that? Inevitably, whether we mean to or not, we begin to minimize the gospel of Jesus Christ. We begin to minimize the power of the purchasing blood of Jesus Christ. We begin to find fellowship in something other than Jesus Christ. We begin to find our unity in something other than Jesus Christ. Saints, it's dividing our churches up. That does not work to maintain the unity that we have in Jesus Christ. How you respond to that person who disagrees with your doctrinal position; how you respond to that person who comes to a different conclusion on how you should educate your children or what premarital relationships should look like - how you respond to that person is the evidence and depth of your love in the local church. You see, if we just keep surrounding ourselves, within the church, with little subcultures - we're the homeschooling group; we're the courtship group; we're the amillennial group; we are this group; we're that group; and anyone who doesn't agree with you in those areas, although you do have union with them in Christ, that's not good enough for fellowship anymore. I won't let my kids be around anyone who doesn't homeschool.

What are you teaching your children? That homeschool is more important than union in Jesus Christ. I think some of us are going to wake up one day and realize we put all of our hope and faith in educating our children in our home. Homeschooling doesn't save anybody! It's Jesus Christ that saves. And I homeschool my kids. Listen, I'm not implying that the love you have with the group of people you have surrounded yourself with that hold to those same convictions - I'm not saying it's not love. It is love. I think it's love. What I want us to look at is this: But what is the depth of my love?

And Paul seems to think the depth of your love is revealed not with those you've gathered around yourself who affirm you all day, but the one who doesn't see it the same way and how you treat that brother or sister is the reality of the depth of your love for the local church. Let's look at it in verse 4. Paul says, "Love is patient." Love suffers long. Assumed in this first characteristic of love is offense. He assumes that there's provocation here between two people. He assumes there's differences and disagreements here. Why do we say that? Because know this, you

don't have to suffer long with people who agree with you in every point of doctrine and live out the same way you do. You don't suffer with those people. You just sit around and affirm each other. Look how spiritual we are! Look how unspiritual they are! I don't suffer long if you just build me up all day and agree with me in every area. That's not suffering. But Paul says genuine love suffers long.

Genuine love is revealed in the face of adversity. In the face of disagreement. So how long are we suffering with those who disagree with us or have offended us because they haven't come to the same conclusions? Well, that's the reality of the depth of your love. What's assumed in the characteristic again is provocation. It assumes someone has provoked you here. They've provoked you by not seeing it the way that you see it. *"Well, I showed it to them in Scripture. It's so clear. Why can't they see it?"* Love when they've been provoked, does not provoke back. But it suffers long with the other person. What becomes very clear in Paul's definition of love here is that the love Paul is speaking about is not the love the world speaks about. The love the world speaks about is emotion-driven; feelings-based. And know this, genuine love is full of emotion and feelings. But it's not feelings-driven or feelings-based.

Beloved, the love that Paul is calling you and I to to preserve the unity we have in Jesus Christ is nothing less than the love of Jesus Christ in the gospel. This is the love that you and I are being called to. This is not a love in word only. It's a love in deed and action. It's a love in the face of provocation that suffers long. Let's apply this first characteristic again here. Suffering long. Someone in the church disagrees with a doctrinal position you spent the last six months reading three books on and listening to 25 sermons on. And you're convinced you've come to the right conclusion. You've sat down with them and you've shown it to them, and they just don't see what you're talking about. In fact, they see the other side of it.

Now, we become passionate about truth, and Christians should be passionate about truth. But what this love does is it's patient with that person. Have you ever noticed - and I've seen this in my own life - you'll begin to study and focus on an area of doctrine. Something that maybe wasn't even on the radar for the first ten years in your Christianity. You spend six months studying on it and you're an expert on it. You dogmatically go to other people in your church, and you can't stop talking about it, and you struggle that they can't see it the way you've explained it. You forget that it was ten years in the faith - it wasn't even on your radar. But now if they don't come to the same conclusion as you've come to, you can't even be in fellowship with them anymore in the local church. Know this, saints, suffering long is more than just biting your tongue when someone disagrees with you, and distancing yourself from them. Because one of the things we need to see here is that these first two characteristics - patience and kindness - actually go

together. One's the other side of the coin of the other. Let me put them together with you and show you what this really looks like.

Love is patient. It suffers long in the face of provocation. But more than that, love is kind. The root word here in "kind" has the idea of being "fit for use." Usefulness. Serving each other. Think with me for a moment here. True love is demonstrated when someone disagrees with you or offends you, and instead of responding back to them and provoking them back, you do not respond back to them with that, but rather you show them patience. But more than that, you move towards that person to serve them in kindness. I don't know about you, but that's really hard. I'm so convinced I'm right. I'm so passionate because this is about the glory of God, and I think they're robbing the glory of God in their life, so I'm trying to show them, I'm trying to sit with them and work with them, I've walked them through every Scripture in the Bible. They still don't see it. And they're getting a little frustrated with me because I won't stop talking about my doctrinal points so much. And what this says is this: That even if I'm right in the doctrinal position, I'm going to be patient with this brother or sister. But more than that, I'm going to begin to move towards them and serve them in kindness. You know what I see happening? I shared truth with you and you didn't get it. You're not going to be in the circle anymore. I'm not going to fellowship with you as much as I used to anymore. It's one thing to bite your lip and not respond when you've been provoked. It's a whole other thing to move towards that person you disagree with and find ways to serve them and welcome them in the church.

Can I ask you something? Isn't that what Jesus Christ did to you? Weren't you and I provoking Jesus Christ? In fact, I think the only thing we were doing was provoking Jesus Christ. And didn't He pointedly and individually not only not give you what you deserved which was His wrath? He did not. He was long suffering with you. But more than just suffering long with you, didn't Jesus Christ move towards you and seek you out and look to serve you by laying His life down for you? And isn't this exactly what we need to do? If we're going to maintain the unity we have in our local churches in the midst of our diversity, we need to respond with Christ-like, gospel-centered love and move towards those people we disagree with and serve them. What a testimony that would be to them and to those outside. This is the love we're called to. Gospel-centered love.

Ask yourself right now, those in your local church who view premarital relationships different than you, who view how to educate your children different than you, who've arrived at different conclusions of your favorite doctrines, are you moving towards that person to serve them and welcome them? Because that's the genuine depth of your love in the local church right there. That's it right there. Or are you like so many that I see that say, well, I'm only going to associate with

the people who homeschool like me. I don't want their lack of seriousness to rub off on me or my children. And you forget all along that you're speaking about someone purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ. This is not being patient. This is not being kind. And it is unloving. It's sin.

Do you know that loveless orthodoxy is sin? In Revelation 2, Jesus warned a church that seemed to have all their doctrine right, debated it, stood in the face of false teachers, and hated evil. He commended them for all of that. And then He turned to them and said this: you need to repent though. You say, well, they had left their first love and that's referring to Jesus Christ. I agree. But can I ask you this question? Where is the evidence of your love for Jesus Christ most revealed? In love for His church. How can you love Him whom you have not seen if you can't love your brother or sister who you do see? "I love Jesus!" The depth of your love for Jesus is revealed in how you love His bride. And the reality of love is not just those who agree with you, but those who have disagreed with you and offended you. I'm not suggesting in any way, beloved, that we do not discuss these doctrines or our convictions in our local churches. We need to. It's one of the means of grace that God has used to grow us and sharpen us. But I am suggesting that we discuss them in the context of gospel-centered unity and clothed in Christlike humility and love.

When we allow something other than Jesus Christ to become the basis of our unity and our fellowship, again, we inevitably minimize Jesus Christ and the gospel and the work against the unity that He's given to us. Think of this statement and see if it just rings wrong for you.

Yes, you're my brother in Christ, both saved and redeemed by the grace of Jesus Christ, and we have that in common and we agree on those things, but we've come to a different place eschatologically, so I can't even be in fellowship with you anymore.

I'm not minimizing the importance of any other doctrines. But I'm saying that the unity that we share in Christ, and the love within that unity should help us be able to work together, have these discussions, encourage each other, sharpen each other without breaking the fellowship and unity we have in our local churches which is centered upon Jesus Christ. So yes, discuss these things. Yes, encourage and build up each other in these things. Yes, sharpen each other in these things. But do it clothed in love and humility. And when others disagree with you or do it differently, suffer long with them and move towards them in kindness and service. So we don't treat them like second-class Christians. Because know this, there are no second-class Christians. The fact that our rallying point is a cross says one thing: the playing field is level.

The only reason why any of us are getting in is grace. That's it. And when you make something other than the cross and Jesus Christ the basis of our fellowship, you minimize the work of Christ. Jesus Christ identifies with the lowest of understanding doctrine Christian. They will be welcomed in to the same degree that you will be. They are loved by Jesus Christ in the same way that you are loved, because the basis of His love is not rooted in you, it's rooted in Himself. I'm not condoning immaturity in doctrine. I'm not condoning indifference to how we live out our lives and Jesus Christ is not either. But again, Jesus Christ identifies with them. We need to be careful how we speak about the body of Christ; how we treat the body of Christ. Jesus said to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" when he was persecuting the church. Jesus so identifies with His church that how you treat them, He views it as how you treat Him.

Know this, we can have our doctrine right, but the doctrine that we believe we have right has not had its full work in us until it manifests in Christlike love towards each other. You can have your doctrine right, but that doctrine has not had its full work in you until it manifests itself through you in Christ-centered love. This love we're called to is patient and kind. One more here. Paul says this love "does not envy or boast, it is not arrogant or rude."

Can I tell you that nothing works faster at causing disunity in the local church as spiritual pride? The Corinthians thought: We are something. We have these gifts. We understand this doctrine. We've arrived. We're living sacrificially. Look at us. And Paul didn't deny any of those things were important, but he knew without love, those things would divide the church. The genuineness and depth of my love is not seen with those who agree with me, but with those who disagree with me and how I respond to them. I've often referred to the local church as a brewing pot of sanctification. Sometimes I find people just leaving local church after local church, looking for people who are exactly like themselves. One of the reasons God put you in churches with such diversity culturally and maturity-wise is to abound you in Christlike love. And that's hard. It's a lot more comfortable and easy just to keep finding subgroups of Christians who believe all that you believe and do it all the way you do. But that's not how He made the church. He made the church diverse, so we could abound in love as we show patience and kindness to those who disagree with us.

Can I give you one test that you're being boastful or arrogant? If you constantly feel the need to talk about your doctrinal positions with everyone in the local church, that's a sign of arrogance and boasting. If you view everyone in your local church as positions rather than people, and your goal is just to win everyone over to your position - you're not even asking people anymore: Hey, how are you doing? What's going on at work? How can I be praying for you? If every time they

walk up to you all they hear about is why they should be doing it this way or why they should believe this doctrine, you're in a dangerous place. If you look down at others who disagree with you and only surround yourself with people who look like you and talk like you and do like you do, that's a sign of spiritual pride. It's not preserving unity.

Let me ask us this question. What if Jesus Christ did that to us? What if Jesus said to us: You know, I know we have this whole gospel thing that we agree in, but in these areas of doctrine, you're wrong. And He began to treat you like a second-class Christian. What would happen? Every single one of us would be put out of His inner circle.

Can I tell you this? Jesus Christ has never done that to you once. He keeps moving towards you and pursuing you in love. How can we as Christians so freely receive this love from Christ on the basis of grace and then treat others without love because they differ from us in different areas of conviction or doctrine? You know what that's called? Gospel amnesia. You're forgetting how Christ has treated you in the gospel. To have right doctrine but lack love for one another, it is sin.

There's so much more we could say here in Corinthians about it. But before I finish, I want to encourage you because saints, the hope we have of maintaining our unity in Christ in the midst of our diversity is Jesus Christ's gospel-centered love towards those who disagree. Again, it's not love or truth, it's truth in love. It's a love that suffers long. It's a love that moves towards others who disagree; who provoke us. And it's about that person - serving them in kindness. It's a love that keeps no record of wrongs. It's a love that believes the best about each other. And why? Because this is the love that Jesus Christ has shown to you and continues to show you day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year.

I will confess to you personally that as I studied this, and preached six sermons on it in our church, I came to the conclusion that I'm not quite as loving as I thought I was. In fact, I talked to some people in our church after we finished six sermons on this. And they were discouraged. They said I thought I was loving, but I realize I've just surrounded myself with people who think of the doctrines the way I think of them and do it the way I do it, but I'm struggling with those who disagree with me and I'm not as loving as I thought I could be and it's really hard to love those people. If that's you today, if you say if I'm going to be honest, I haven't been treating people who disagree with me with kindness, looking to move towards them, to serve them and welcome them; and I've made the basis of my fellowship in my local church those who agree with me and affirm me. And I want to love like you're talking about. I see that's how Christ loves me, and I want to love like that, but I'm really struggling to love like that. What do we do? Well, most of us have been taught our whole life that Jesus is our example. And He is. And that when you

find yourself struggling in obedience to Him, to just try harder. And then you keep falling down and realizing I can't do this. The reason why trying harder doesn't work is because the love that you and I are called to is not something we can produce on our own. Think of Galatians 5 with me. The fruit of the Spirit is love. What does that tell us? The love you and I are called to is a fruit. It's something I cannot grit my teeth and produce by trying harder. It's something that must be produced in me and through me.

Well, does this mean I'm not responsible? I don't have a part in this? No, you are responsible in this area. Well, how do we love like this then? I heard an analogy that I'll close with and I think will be helpful for you. As we all look at the call that Paul's put before us of love, which is nothing short of Jesus Christ, and we become discouraged to see I'm struggling to love like this and I fall short. I want to emulate Jesus Christ. I want to love like He does, but I'm struggling so much. What hope do I have? Is it just try harder?

And here's the analogy. Let's say all of you love music. And you love beautiful music. And I come to you and I say, well, I want you to begin to produce, write, and play music like Mozart. He's your example. And you say wonderful. I want that kind of music. I want to produce that music; write that music; play that music. And you sit down and you study Mozart. You look at Mozart. You examine Mozart. And you try really hard. And you fall miserably on your face over and over again and you become discouraged. You say, I'm trying so hard to play music like Mozart; to compose. I just don't find the strength to do that. And I would agree with you. You're not going to play like Mozart if you try harder. But what if I told you this? The spirit of Mozart was going to come and reside inside of you? And compose through you? And write through you? And empower you to write music? To compose music? And to play music like him? Then, you'd be mightily encouraged and say yes, I can play music! I can compose like Mozart. Not because of my strength, my trying harder, but because the spirit of Mozart lives in me.

Well, beloved, that's what happened in the gospel. Jesus Christ not only forgives you and I for our lovelessness, He takes up residence within us. It is the Spirit of Christ and His love in us working through us, being produced for His glory. So where do we begin with that though? You need to begin by confessing inability. John 15:5 - I can't do this, God. Then by faith, you abide in Christ. You be led by the Spirit. You walk by the Spirit. And you lay hold of the truth of the gospel that Jesus Christ in us will produce His fruit through us and make it so we can maintain the unity of Christ in our local churches for the glory of God. This is our gospel. It not only forgives, it empowers. Let's pray.

Father, in the name of Jesus, I pray that You would help each of us. Lord, convict us of our lovelessness. Help us to mark it for what it is which is sin. Help us

believe the gospel. That if we confess this sin, You're faithful and just to cleanse us and forgive us. But help us believe the rest of the gospel. That the Spirit of Christ is now in us. That love that we so seek to emulate. His power is towards us who believe. God, that we would abide more and appropriate the gospel more. Led by the Spirit; walking by the Spirit. And that Your fruit would be manifest in us and through us for Your glory. God, accomplish these things. Preserve the unity in Your church for the testimony of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.