

Without This, Nothing Else Matters
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So much going on in the world today and so grateful. We have an all powerful God who's never anxious or nervous in a storm and not in your life either. I want to start with this question. What would you say is the most accurate measure of spiritual maturity? Like, what's the best indicator that someone has really been growing in their likeness to Jesus?

There's a lot of answers people might give and they might say, Man, this person is really gifted. Or they're like, They read their Bible all the time, or they but the Bible is really, really clear and there's a message that's all the way through. In fact, if you wanted a CliffsNotes version of this book, maybe some of you do. They do, too. Cliff notes anymore. I don't know what they call them now. The back in my day, instead of reading like War and Peace, all 500 pages you just read to write. And it was called CliffsNotes and it gave you the summary. And not that I would ever do that, but if you wanted the Cliff's Notes version of the Bible, you find it a couple of places, and one of them is in Romans chapter 13.

And here's what it says. It says, The commands of the Bible are all summed up in this one command Love your neighbor as yourself. Love is the fulfillment of the law. Here's what it's saying. If you really want to please God, learn to love people. Well, like and even hard situations. That's the true measure of spiritual maturity. A corollary of that is this If you struggle to value people and you just go, I don't really like a lot of people around me, it would just be honest here.

It's it's an indicator that you need to go back and check like the foundation of your faith. Or maybe if you're on your way that you say, God, that's what I need you to do. I need you to work a miracle in my life. Friends, here's what I want us to do. I want us to my heart is that Grace Church will continue to be known as a family of people who love.

Well, guys who Lorain Correctional is. Really glad to have you with us there. You'll be known, those of you following Jesus as a group of guys in your cellblock, or they'll be like, Wow, that guy. He treats people differently and in a really positive way. I'll get we get these first

impressions surveys from newcomers are grace and it's it's encouraging me how often people will say, you know, it's like, how did you find out about Grace, you know, Voyager, first experience, whatever.

And how many people say, I just sense people want to be there. I felt loved. I like it was a warm environment. If that was not your experience, I apologize. I'm glad you're still here. But our heart is that we'll just keep on dialing that up, Right? Because if even today you go, I don't really know that I love people that well, what we want to do today is just we want to see what does the Bible mean by love?

Like, what does it actually mean? It's not just some kind of syrupy sentimental like Taylor Swift or I just I love Taylor Swift, you know, whatever musician Bob Marley, you know, you want to pick that it's not just some kind of I feel today like I love and I don't, you know. No, it's it's actually a courageous choice that we make to treat people with dignity and with value, and especially people we find a difficult Jesus.

Jesus says in Matthew five, he goes, Anybody can be kind to people who are kind to them. He goes, You want the acid test of spirituality that you're really growing, and your spirituality goes, I want you to be to love and to value people who who you don't like, who are not kind to you. And so what we want to do is look at this today and in the real stuff of life, you know, to say, what does it look like to love my coworker when they launch another verbal grenade?

I'm like, Are you serious? It's like, again, why do I have to be so difficult? Or maybe it's closer to home and someone you live with and you think this person, they know how much that irritates me and they keep on doing it. Maybe you're a middle schooler or a high schooler. And right now, like when I was in that age care, my parents were like, not cool at all.

You know, I was embarrassed. A mom and dad, What did it look like to love my parents? And that season of what does that look like for you to to go If I want to follow Jesus, how do I love my parents? What about people You don't really know that. Well, maybe the guy who cut you off on the highway. Someone that I don't know. A neighbor moves in. Now you go, God, what does it look like for me to love? Well, if this truly is at the heart of what it means to be a Christ like person and to be doing

well and your spiritual, you know, vibrancy, how do we do it and what does it really mean?

And what happens if we don't do it? Let's take a look and see what Paul says. And maybe the most famous passage in the whole Bible First Corinthians Chapter 13. If you don't have a paper Bible, you can turn to the Bible app on your phone, all of the words on the screen as well. Just want to say hello again to all the guys at Lorain Correctional. Really glad some of you may know. We have a campus at Lorain Correctional with a bunch of guys there and also to others watching in different places, engaging, really grateful to have you with us today.

We're going to do something here. We want you to engage online and do the same with us. You can choose if you're going to be a group one or group two, but here we're going to sort of in Lorain, we're going to just sort of say over here to my left, your group one, and over here to my right, your group two and we're going to do a sort of a scripture reading back and forth as a group one, you're going to start us. We're going to go back and forth. A final slide we'll all do together.

Okay. So group one, here it is. Let's say together. Ready? 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. Group two 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.

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 again. Nothing. Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It does not dishonor others. 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. Yours love never fails. And then all together. And now these three remain faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. That's a powerful section of Scripture, isn't it? It's probably been read at hundreds of thousands of weddings.

But the fact is that Paul did not write it for newly married couples. It's appropriate for that. There's no problem with that. But he wrote it for all of us, and he wrote it in a specific situation where people were not really known for loving well, they're known for a lot of other stuff, but they were weren't known for that.

So in the middle of this passage, Paul says 15 things, 15 about what love does and does not do. And when you try to group these 15 elements into categories, there's two big ones and then a couple that maybe fall in the third one. But number one would be statements about how love is faithful. Like even when it's hard, love doesn't give up.

The second round of statements about how love is humble. It's not arrogant. 13 of the 15 seemed to fit into those two categories. The other two talk about the good that love does. That love is kind that it it rejoices when the truth wins. So you'll see in your notes or if you've got your notes, maybe you got some on the way here.

You can go to our website and go to the bulletin on the front page and you'll see the message notes there. But but Paul defines love in a way that his friends in Corinth, they knew like, Oh, he's talking about us because he was he was delving into like very specific situations in this letter that he writes to this church in Greece, and they were doing things that were the antithesis of love.

So in first Corinthians one and two, he goes, You're arguing and you're being divisive. First Corinthians two is four. He says, You're bragging about how gifted you are in chapter five. He goes, You brag about, you know, breaking through sexual boundaries. Verse chapter six They were taking each other to core. Chapter eight. They didn't care how their behaviors affected other people.

They're like, I'll do whatever I want to do. I don't care how it impacts other people. And Paul's like, You know what, folks at the very core of your faith, you're failing. This isn't the way that Jesus followers treat people. It's not what love does. I think in the last few years there have been a lot of Jesus followers who they're like, Well, I'll tell you what I think about that, you know, And they're really confident that they have the goods, you know, and they can tell the world what's wrong and what's right.

But have we really loved people? Well, like, do they feel a sense of what, I'm with this person, man, my dignity, my level of just worth. I just feel better when I'm with that person. And it's really interesting. Here's Paul makes the case that the opposite of love is not hate, but pride. It's the biggest list of descriptors that genuine love lifts up people around you.

It doesn't mean, well, I don't hate them so I guess I love them. No, it actually means you're not arrogant with other people. You're not always bringing the focus back to you. That when you're with another person that they go, Wow, I just feel more special when I'm with them. Genuine love is humble. So here's what Paul does.

He makes five. He tells us what love is. Those 15 things when he makes five shocking statements to show us how meaningless our Christian faith is if it is not of all marked by love. So if you're following along in your notes, the first shock statement that Paul makes is this No matter how spiritual, I think am, if I don't love others, my spirituality means nada.

Here's what he says in verse one If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. This hit close to home because the believers in Corinth were proud of how much they spoke in tongues. In fact, if you look over chapter 14, you'll see, at least in my Bible, it talks about prophecy in tongues like that was the that's going to be what Paul talks about.

We'll talk about that in a in a couple of weeks here. But if you've never maybe you've seen the gift of tongues used on television, you're like, oh, my ears are like weirded me out. Like it's confusing and scary. And what is it? It's sort of a speaker and words that are not intelligible to other people around you.

Often it's done privately. It's in a private prayer time where you're just like, your heart is connecting with God's heart and you're pouring your heart to him. And it's in words that other people might understand. It's a gift. It's a gift of tongues, and it's a great gift used properly. The problem is that these people in Corinth Community Church viewed the gift of tongues.

They almost had like an obsession with tongues, like it was the mark of spirituality. And they'd be like, Oh my goodness, have you heard her? Like, I mean, she can speak in tongues for like, an hour. It's unbelievable. She must be the most godly person here. That guy, man, I tell you what, he is like, amazing. And, you know, Paul says, he goes, I don't care how gifted you are in the gift of tongues or whatever the mark of spirituality.

Today, we might say she reads her Bible for like 2 hours every, you know, morning. Or this guy, he prays, you know, and and they're like, they must be so spiritual. And Paul says, if you do all of those things, but you don't love people, well, you don't make the hard choice to value the people around you. You know, he he says he goes, you know what?

It sounds like the God, it sounds like a banging cymbal or gong number of years ago, my parents went to oldies. That's a dangerous place to go. They go to all these for \$33. They found a drum set, four kids, three drums, and one of these right here. I thought they loved me. You know? So they're like, Hey, we got your kids a present.

After about 20 minutes, Mary and I wanted to say we're going to bring it to your house so you can enjoy the music that you know, our kids are making. So our one son was about three at the time, would sit on this little stool and would just with all of us, might just like that, just, Oh, I'm going to do this.

The rest of the mess is just will I talk if you guys can? And you know what Paul says? He goes, If you don't love people, well, all of your spirituality, that's what it sounds like to God. A banging cymbal, a resounding gong, more cowbell. That's what it sounds like. Somebody going, what is he talking about? It's that old Saturday Night Live thing.

You go watch sometime. You know, Paul's. He's he's saying, I want you to I want you to value people most of all. I want them to to know how much they matter to me. And I want them to know through you. Paul continues verse to survive the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge. You can say it this way no matter how popular a teacher I may be if I don't have love for the people around me.

All my giftedness counts for nothing. When he writes about the gift of prophecy, he's talking about people who teach or who have a word like

They'll take God's word and they'll go, Hey, the events that are happening in the world today, they're sort of they tie the world events in with the scripture or maybe even sometimes they'll go, Hey, God gave me a word, I think for you that I sense that this coming year and they might tell you something is sort of a prophetic word.

And, and and it can be a terrific gift. It might be on the platform like I'm doing here, could be in a small group, Bible study might be one on one. But it well, however the gift is is expressed. And you know what the people in Corinth were like really good at this. In fact, if you look back at first Corinthians chapter one, their teachers were like like heroes.

They were held in high regard and so in first Corinthians chapter one, verse verse 11, here's what here's what he says. He says, my brothers and sisters, some from Khloe's household, have informed me that are quarrels among you. What I mean is this one of you says, I follow Paul, another, I follow Apollos, another I follow. See, this is Peter.

Still another. I follow Christ. It's like they all have their own little fan clubs and they they separated based on which teacher they were following. And here's Paul's thing. He goes, You can be the most gifted teacher there is. Like you can fathom the deepest kind of theological mysteries and be super well read and informed by the greatest scholars.

But if you don't love people, he goes you're nothing. To put it simply, God is a whole lot more impressed with simple acts of kindness and choosing to love than he is with home run sermons. I had a friend in Chicago named Richie. Richie passed away of a heart attack in his heaven today as a result, but he was a great friend.

He was a single guy, did well in business, and he said, I want to pray for you. I just want to be like, Can I be your prayer partner? And so I knew him when I was in grad school. And Richie and I, we he was from a different religion, like different Christian tradition background. And so we didn't see eye to eye on some stuff.

So he would tell me he'd go, Hey, I just want to tell you, like Mary, the mother of Jesus, like I know what you think. But she never sinned. And I was like, I think Mary was honorable, but I think she did sin. I mean, I

think all have said, you know, and he didn't think gambling was a problem at all.

And I thought there was at least a lot of and we just didn't see eye to eye on a lot of stuff. And so he he'd tell me, go, hey, Johnny, you know what? I know we're good friends. And over the year, the pastor, he goes, But someday when we get to heaven, you're going to find out I was right.

And I'd be like, you know, maybe so, you know, but. But, Richie, he may not have, in my opinion, had all of his theological, you know, t's crossed and I's got it. But he loved people so. Well, like, you'd go downtown Chicago and he by the guy bought his car from like, hey, Richie, you know, and, and you'd just like and everyone felt treated with dignity and they mattered.

And they knew him by name. He was in his church. Everybody knew Richie. His colleagues is, you know, people. I officiated his funeral several years ago. And and he had told me, as said, Jonathan, you know, I you need to make me promise that when I die, that, you know, wherever I live, so is back in New York.

So I go to New York and people flew in from around the country and said, hey, can I can I can I say some about Richie? And they would talk about like when they were feeling low or he just noticed that they were sad or and how Richie loved them. And I look and I go, Wow, I want to be like, I want to be like that where even if I don't have all the right thinking about stuff and whatever, that, that I would be one that that really loves.

Well, and I'm convinced there's going to be a lot of people in heaven because of the way that Richie, the people around him, Paul goes on, he addresses the prayer warriors in the group and he says, no matter how great my answer is to faithful, pray about all of people, well, my faith is worth nothing. Verse two he says, You might have a faith, a move mountains, but if you don't love, you're nothing.

One of Paul's listeners read this and thought, okay, the guy's like, He's definitely overstating his case there, because if you have a faith that can move mountains like this person prays that, you know, cancer is going

to be eradicated from that person's life and all the people are going to be healed and the lives are going to be touched and everything like that, you know, And he does God, that would be amazing.

And Paul says, you know what? It wouldn't be as amazing as as if you began to just value and give significance and humbly love the people around you. He goes, Now, that would be the mark of vibrant spirituality. But look how bluntly Paul states our condition If we fail to love just three words of the universe to he goes, If I if I don't love, I am what?

Like nothing. This is not like a minor problem in your life. It's not like a little pothole on the way to spiritual, mature, like I got all the other things pretty good, you know, I just don't really love people very well. Paul, go. Oh, no, no. That's like, terminal. That's like a sickness at the core of who you are.

It's how vital love is for spiritual maturity, for being a person who really pleases God. With Paul not done making waves at Corinth Community Church to those who are generous, he says, anniversaries as if I give all I possess to the poor, but have not love, I gain nothing here. Shocker Number five No matter how much money I'm giving to worthy causes, it counts for nothing in heaven.

If love is not the supreme value in my life. Author Howard Hendricks tells the stories. This a very revered guy. The Christian community tells a story of being with a bunch of movers and shakers very like, financially successful Christians who want to make an impact for like you know, kingdom causes. So they get together at this fancy restaurant and they're having a meal and they make their orders.

And when the orders come, when the plates come out, the one guy ends up with broccoli instead of green beans, and he calls a server over and lets her know an uncertain terms with a stinging remark, her inability to get a simple order correct that I got green beans and I broccoli. She sort of goes, you know, slinking off feeling like embarrassing this group of and Howard Hendricks turns to this guy. He goes, hey, I have an idea. When she comes back to our table, why don't you tell her about the difference that Jesus has made in your life? Just tell her your story of life transformation. Howard Hendricks could say

that. Maybe we could all say it. The guy is sort of embarrassed because he realized that he just hadn't even loved the person who was right there in front of made a simple mistake.

How many times have you seen somebody who you had high regard for in a public setting? And then maybe you saw him in a private setting? You're like, maybe he's at a ballgame or whatever. You're like, Holy cow. And you're their influence in your life has been severely diminished because because you're like, wow, I had because I just didn't love.

Well, you hear it, Paul, saying he's saying you can give generously. You can, but if you don't love people, well, your impact is going to be dialed away down one last shockwave that Paul sends about all of this. He says, no matter how much I may suffer for Christ, once again, it's all for nothing if you're not marked by a deep love for people.

When Paul talks about suffering, he's not just talking about like you have a little bit of a ridicule for your faith or you gave up, you know, a golf outing so you could visit someone in the hospital. Listen to what he says in verse three, says, If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, like it's the worst kind of death that I think you could ever have, he says.

But I don't love I gain again nothing. Paul, I don't want you to miss. I'm here. And each instance he sort of goes over the top in describing all these great things that people do. He uses superlatives, right? Look at this. You might circle the key words in Bible, in your notes. In verse one, he talks about speaking not only in the tongues of men, but of what angels?

In verse two, he says, You might be able to fathom, you know, some mysteries. No, no, no. All mysteries, all knowledge and a faith that can move not like a tree or a stone, but mountains. And verse three says, You might give all you possess to the not 50%, not 75 everything, or surrender your body to the flames.

If I could paraphrase what I think Paul is saying, he's going, Hey, before you like out your life and do the martyr thing. He says, You know, it would really honor God if you stay employed and and you just let my love, the love of Jesus, be poured out through your life to the people

around you, the people in your in your home, the people in your workplace, the poor, your customers that you serve, the neighbor that you find very irritating if you would treat them with dignity and and that that would be better than giving all of your money to the poor, better than even dying at the stake.

If you would love people, well, that would be amazing. You know, I'm grateful we don't do it on our own. It says in Romans five that God, the Holy Spirit is poured out his love into our hearts, that we can just go, God, I don't feel love for that person. And Jesus said, That's okay. Just choose to treat them like you believe.

I would want to treat them. And I'm going to help you on that journey. Because what Paul's saying here is this If I don't love others, what this whole section is saying is, in the eyes of God, my life is a big zero. I'm spiritually bankrupt. That's what Paul is saying. Love isn't a special ability for a select group of people. You go, you know, hey, you know, I tend to be like an administrative person. I use my gifts that way and they love people. I mean, they were just too No, no, no, no, no, no. Paul says, No, no. I want you all to be marked by love. So he wraps up this chapter of a few reminders. Let me just say this briefly in verse 8 to 10.

Here's what he says. Where there are prophecies. This is one day when Jesus comes again, they will cease with their tongues. They will be still where there is knowledge you'll pass away for we know impart. We prophesy purple when completeness comes, when Jesus restores all things, when he comes again, what is impart will disappear. What is Paul saying?

He's going When we get to this, when we are in heaven, when all things remain new, our spiritual gifts will cease. But love never will. You think of these three. You won't have to prophesy about the future because you'll be enjoying the future that has been prepared for you. You don't have to use any kind of special languages to communicate with the Lord because you'll have a face to face relationship with Jesus.

And you don't need a special gift of knowledge because you'll know all there is that you need to know. But love, love will always be central. He goes, All these other things will stop but but not love. He goes, Love will

always be something that will mark the people of God. Next, Paul lets us know that love is the best indicator of spiritual maturity.

In verse 11, he goes, When I was a child, I talk like a child, like a child or reason like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. You know what he's saying? Essentially this. He's going to people in the corner and he's telling us he's going, Quit acting like children. He says, quit getting like, you know, divided over lesser things or like, you know, and just arguing about stuff that he's saying, I want you to be known, Like I want you to be.

People who are marked by love doesn't mean you can have opinions again, but you treat people as more important than your opinions. And then finally, number three, he would say this We are most like Christ when we decide to love. This is how it ends, he says in verse 13. Now, these three remain faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is is love.

That's not to disparage faith and hope. Faith, It says without faith, you can't please God. Hebrews Chapter 11, verse six Hope is the expression of our faith. But but in the Bible, it doesn't say that God is hope or the God has faith. It says that God is what is love like that. That's who He is. He doesn't just have love. He is love. So we're most like Christ when we decide to love. It's not just one more virtue that I cultivate in my Christian life. It's the most significant badge of identification for a follower of Jesus to see people like he sees them and to love them like he loves them.

Let me close with this. My wife, Mary, had an experience at the grocery store. She's gone out to her car, you know, and she got the groceries in the car and everything. She going on. This guy was walking out about the same time she is. And so it's one of those things where like to not say something would feel rude. She just makes pleasantries, you know, and says, hey, how you doing? Beautiful day, you know, and everything like that. And it turns out the cars are right next to each other. So she says, you know, hey, it just makes you ask the question. And he pauses and he says, you know, thank you for just your kindness to me today. He said It was a year ago today that my wife died. And it is a really hard day. And the tears begin to come and and so Mary just said, I I'm so sorry. You know, she'd never met him before. And so they chatted for a

second and she came home and she said, Jonathan, she said, You never know. Do you know what people are carrying in their hearts? Like you're at a grocery store? You have no idea the burdens that people have, the person sitting next to you and on a bus or on a plane or someone in a waiting room with you or someone sitting in the row with you.

A church or guys at Lorain, someone in your cellblock. And you go, How do I even know the pain that this guy's coming in with and the way that he's faced adversity in the past? And so we prayed, Jesus, would you help me to see people the way you see every person that I encounter with whom I lock eyes is a person for whom you died.

And God help me to love them, whatever that means, to make decisions where they will feel honored and valued and significant. May I be humble enough to elevate them and for them to say, Man, if Jesus loves me like that, maybe he's someone I'd want to follow. Friends. May it be that we dial up our love in the power of the Holy Spirit?

How are you doing this area? Is it an area where you want to grow? If you were to replace the word love or in this chapter, love is patient with your name. Jonathan is patient. Jonathan. Would it work? And if it doesn't sync up, can you ask the Spirit of God to make these more real in your life?

Let's pray and ask. Would you pray with me? Spirit of Jesus? Would you come fill our hearts with your love and Lord especially love for people that we find it challenging to love God? I pray for that in my own life, and that will follow your promise to take the steps needed that other people will encounter you through us.

Lord, make us a people who love really, really well that we would be, in the words of Paul and Ephesians five imitators of God. There are four dearly loved children who are living a life of love. God, may we be courageous and strong to that end so that others can encounter you and your name can be honored. We pray this Jesus in your name.

And everyone said, And then may it be this song we're going to sing is just we're looking at who God is in May it be that He just pours out his goodness into us that we can share with others? Let's stand as a team leads us.