

Title: Through a Mirror Dimly  
Theme: You are called to live and grow in the love of God.  
Reading/Text: I Cor. 13

Brothers and sisters in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Let us begin with a false understanding of love. One thing that I have always appreciated about Bono and the band U2, is the depth of their lyrics, and the fact that he is wrestling with the ordinary experiences of life and digs into deeper concepts like 'love'. His song 'ordinary love' in particular has many insights into the kind of day to day love that is necessary to live in this world, as well as a longing for that love. But just recently U2 came out calling for Ireland to repeal their pro-life laws. Bono has called himself a Christian, but also has undermined the differences between religions. As such, the band U2 may be in love with the concept of love, they might know many things about love. But according to the Apostle Paul, **Bono has become as sounding brass and a clanging cymbal when he talks about love.**

St. Augustine speaks of his muddled struggles with love before his conversion to Christ and being captured by the Word: **“I was not yet in love, yet I loved to love...I sought what I might love, in love with loving.”** Isn't that where we are all at, in a sense of the word? We love love, we may even think that we are in love with love. But we don't know what love is until we know the love of God in Jesus Christ. Because God is love. He is the definition of love and so defines all our other loves.

I Cor. 13 presents a way of life for the Christian community. It is a call to faith in the Christian community, and it unveils the deeper mysteries of God to the Christian community. It clears all the confusion about what love really is in the middle of what so many call love. Here it is defined, and here the Apostle Paul calls the Christian community to a more excellent way: **you are called to live and grow in the love of God.**

Here we find a very clear definition of love:

1. What love is not (vs. 1-3)
2. What love is (vs. 4-8)
3. What love is becoming (vs. 9-13)

### **1. What love is not (vs. 1-3)**

**There many people in this world who do good things.** There are wealthy men who give thousands and millions of dollars to orphanages. Bill Gates is known as a great benefactor. Pop stars gain popularity by giving money. There are intelligent men who know the Bible backwards and forwards and yet, do not confess that Jesus is Lord. There are “martyrs” in Islam, who die for a cause that they believe is right. Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi both made great sacrifices for what they believed to be a greater cause. But what is common to all is that they did not have love. That is, from what we know they did not know the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Paul begins by **challenging speaking in tongues.** Remember that I Cor. 13-15, focuses on edification within the Christian community. No matter how **eloquent** a minister, a pop star, an elder, a member in the congregation, without love he will be like the monotonous clanging of a symbol, the dull gong of brass on brass. As Calvin comments, the Corinthians cared a lot about diversity of languages, but they measured everything by ambition, not by the **fruit of real change and transformation.**

In vs. 2, Paul states **“And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all**

**knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing...**" Paul raises **prophecy** to a high place, but then says it is nothing without love. He also focuses on something that Reformed people take a lot of pride in. **I might have all knowledge of the Scriptures and the mysteries of the Scriptures.** This is a particular temptation for seminarians, because we can use our new found knowledge to boast rather than to serve people. But it can also be a problem in the Church. Many Reformed Churches take pride in our confessions and our tomes of theology. Knowledge and confessions and theology are good things, but they can cloud our love through our intense pride in our systems of theology and deep knowledge. As to the matter of faith, Calvin argues that Paul specifically restricts **faith** to the working of the miracles. This is the interpretation that makes the most sense. You might have the faith to heal someone, and yet, without love, it is nothing.

In vs. 3, we see that you may be so giving to **bestow your goods to feed** the poor. This has happened many times throughout history. Again, it is a good thing. But even such a massive act of self-sacrifice is nothing without love. Even if Paul were to give his body to be burned, in the act of Christian martyrdom, without love, it would profit him nothing. He eventually did give his life for the gospel, but we know that his life was given to the love of God.

You might have the biggest church in North America. You might have the best evangelistic program going for you. You might be involved in projects for justice and charity. You might have the poor coming in and out of your house daily for food. You might know your tomes of theology, and be able to explain backwards and forwards the difference between Presbyterians, Baptists, and Reformed. You might be able to argue circles around a Mormon or an atheist, or have the perfect church liturgy, or have the best catechizing program in the world. But if you don't have love. It will profit you nothing. The Apostle Paul says this because he sees the raw ambition at play within the church. He sees men who lack charity and love.

Imagine that you build a beautiful home up in Northern Ontario. It is on a rocky ledge above a beautiful rock-bottom lake. The framing on the house is top notch. The shingles will last for half a century or more. The kitchen is full of the best dishes, it is equipped with a gym, a laundry-room, a spacious living room and 5 bedrooms. The landscaping is stellar. You have brought in the best landscapers in the province. You sit down in your living room when everything is complete. And all of a sudden your heart skips a beat as you realize that you forgot to put a heating system in. That is what the church is like without love. Everything might be perfect. But when winter hits, you will freeze up cold and stiff. Then you won't just be the chosen, but the frozen chosen. So we also must look at what love is.

## **2. What love is (vs. 4-8)**

And so, the Apostle Paul launches into an explanation of what love is. And remember that as you read this explanation, that this is a reflection of the love of God which was shown to you and me in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul begins by examining the fruits of love. We like to know what love *looks like*, and so the Apostle Paul talks about the real kind of ordinary love, brings it down to earth, and shows us what it looks like. Of course, it is very impractical to our minds that are inclined to wickedness.

Love suffers long and is kind. It is patient it is kind. The Apostle Paul is writing this with the aim of the unity of the Church in Corinth. He desires that men and women be long-suffering with each other. Kindness and patience come together.

This passage has often been used for weddings and that is a good thing. But **marriage is only a secondary application to Paul's primary application to the church.** At the same time, marriage is like a little picture of how the church is called to live together as a spiritual unit. Often the way that we treat each other as Christians is the tip of the iceberg for how we treat each other in our marriages and families. Are you characterized by long-suffering and kindness? Both in your marriage and in the Christian community?

Love does not envy, does not parade itself, is not puffed up. Love does not grab for what someone else has. **Where envy reigns**, when people are glancing at what someone else has, there is no love. **It does not parade itself**, in other words it doesn't evoke envy from others. In other words, love doesn't act like a jerk, like in the case of somebody who is always thinking about himself, boasting, bragging, flirting. **It is also not puffed up.** One might call this person an airhead. It might be a dude that is obsessed with his intellect or physical strength, or a girl who is obsessed with her skills and beauty. Or it could just be someone who thinks they are super spiritual. Being puffed up refers to being puffed up with yourself.

**It does not behave rudely.** Sometimes men and women think that honesty means being rude. But honesty and truth can be spoken in ways that build up rather than tear down. **It does not seek its own.** In other words, it is genuinely thinking about the other person. **It is not provoked.** In other words, it is not easily provoked to anger. It keeps a level-head during very provoking times.

**It does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in truth.** In other words, love doesn't pat someone on the back when they do something wrong. This is what Bono seems to believe what love is. Love speaks the truth, but when it speaks the truth, it does it with patience and kindness, without envy or a bloated head or rudeness, or seeking its own good. All these aspects of love are intricately bound up in one another. We cannot be good at one aspect of love without continually working on all the other aspects.

**It bears all things.** It takes up its cross to follow Christ. **It believes all things.** It believes the best and seeks the best. **It hopes all things.** It hopes the best. **It endures all things.** Look at the prophet Hosea in the Old Testament. He endured much abuse and scorn, but he continued to call out in love.

**Love never fails.** While all those earthly things pass away – prophecies and tongues and knowledge – love remains the principle for life in the church. Love never fails, because it will exist in perfection in heaven. Here on earth, we struggle with sin, but we pursue the love of God.

As we read these words, I'm sure you will see your shortcomings. Love will not be in its perfection until heaven, but the Church, as the Bride of Jesus Christ, must pursue it here on earth in submission to her groom, Jesus Christ. It is a very high bar and we fall far short of that bar. But we do see this law of love obeyed in perfection in the person of Jesus Christ. He loved us, so that we can love one another. He opened up the way for us to grow in love before the throne of God as we seek His face and live in His presence. And so we look at:

### 3. What love is becoming (vs. 9-13)

**“For we know in part and we prophesy in part.”** It is due to our imperfection that knowledge and prophecy exist. The gifts in question are but temporary gifts. But love will be with us even in the state of perfection in heaven. As such Christian love is a taste of heaven. As we grow in Christian love, we are setting our sights on heaven.

**“But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.”** That

which is in part refers back to the gifts of prophecy and knowledge. But when will this perfection come? It will come when we die and we live with Christ. It will come at the end of time when Christ comes back to judge the living and the dead.

**“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”** Brothers and sisters, we must move on to maturity. There is nothing wrong with being young in the faith, but there must be a continual growth. The writer to the Hebrews also speaks of this maturity **“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.”** (Heb. 6:1-3)

**“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.”** This is often the language of Paul as he speaks of growth in the Christian life. In II Cor. 3, he speaks of being transformed from glory to glory. You have probably all had times in your life where everything comes together and you understand things more clearly. One day you will see Christ face to face, you will look upon the face of God and live. For now you have that vision in the Scriptures, as the Holy Spirit gives you a vision of Jesus Christ. You are fully known by God. That is how you can know anything.

**“And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”** Three sermons could be written on this verse, but let us consider this for now. This love that the Apostle Paul speaks of is a selfless love. Calvin comments that faith and hope derive a benefit, whereas love extends its benefits to others. Faith and hope are given to us in the state of imperfection, but love will remain with us in perfection. This is the Apostle Paul's response to the selfish and ungodly ambition in the church in Corinth. He drives the members of the Church in Corinth to love one another with a selfless love that reflects the love of God for us in Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion:**

I trust that as we have arrived at the end of this passage, that you have considered how the love of God in Jesus Christ ought to challenge our false understandings of love and transform the Christian community here. We have seen what love is not, what love is, and what love is becoming among us. We really do see through a mirror dimly at times. It becomes clear that we only know in part. But let us press forward to maturity. Let us reject the false understandings of love among us and in the world around us. Jesus Christ is present among us, labouring in His Church to push us forward to a deeper maturity in the way that we treat each other. **Knowledge and doctrine are not the final goal of the Church, rather they are a very important aid to help us love one another better, and primarily to show our love to God in worship.** Let us press forward in faith and hope and let us pursue the love of God among us. Let us stand firm in the divine Love of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.