

Good morning. You know, back when I was in grade school, we used to celebrate Valentine's Day with these cheap cardboard cards. You guys remember those? They had the perforated edges because they came in a sheet and you had to tear them apart. They were horrible, weren't they?

There wasn't any candy on them, no stickers or anything. It was just kind of a hunk of cardboard. And you'd have one for everybody in your class. Well, when I was in fourth grade, there was this little girl that I liked. Her name was Holly.

And I didn't want to just give her a piece of cardboard, so I got some construction paper and some markers, and I decided I was going to make her a card. And you need to understand, I have absolutely zero artistic talent whatsoever, right? But I didn't let that stop me. I took, you know, pink and red construction paper, white, layered them all out. Then I drew a picture.

You have to think stick figures with me. I wrote her name at the top and. And it said, will you be my valentine? Then in school, it was time to go ahead and pass those cards out. So I went up to Holly, and I was pretty proud of this ugly card that I had.

And I came up to her. I handed her the card. She looked down at it, and then she handed it back and walked away. A complete rejection, right? Nobody likes rejection.

But I didn't let that stop me. I went back to my desk, I took a pen, I crossed out Holly's name, and I wrote Judy. And I brought it over to this other little girl, and I gave her the card. And keep in mind, you could clearly see that I crossed out Holly's name. But she loved it, right?

She was all happy, gave me a little awkward hug. I don't think we ever spoke another word together after that day. But the value of that card didn't change based on how it was received. One person rejected it. The other felt deeply cared for.

And that's how a lot of us misunderstand love. We tend to think about love as how it makes us feel. And that's how a lot of people approach our text today. It's one of the best known passages in the Bible. It's all about love.

And people treat it like poetry. They read it at weddings. And the problem is, that approach gets it all twisted up, because Paul didn't write this chapter to give us a fuzzy feeling. He didn't write it to make it a nice addition to a wedding program. And like so much of the Bible, you can't understand what it's about if you look at it in a vacuum, you need to examine the context around it, and all of a sudden the meaning will become clear.

Now, do you remember what we were talking about last week? Spiritual gifts. There's two chapters in the Bible that are primarily about spiritual gifts. There's First Corinthians 12, which we looked at last week. First Corinthians 14, which we'll look at next week.

And then in the middle, we have this chapter on love. But Paul wasn't pausing here. This isn't just a change of topic for something lighter for a moment. It's all part of the same argument. Paul told them that their gifts are meant to build up the church, that they're not meant for personal gain.

And before he begins digging into specific gifts, he wants to provide a foundation built from love. So starting in verse one, it says, if I speak in the tongue of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. See, what Paul is doing here is trying to get the people to understand just how important love is in the church.

And it takes these different gifts that they all wanted, they all celebrated, and he just levels them and he covers the full spectrum of gifts here. So if you thought speaking in tongues was the ultimate thing, Paul says, hey, you are just a loud, annoying sound if you don't have love. If you think prophecy is the top of the heap or faith strong enough to move mountains and you think that's where it's at, he says, no, if you have those things and no love, you're nothing. And it isn't only these flashy gifts. Paul says, no, let's talk about other things people do that we admire.

So he says, if you just give everything up for God, if you sell all of your stuff so you can give the money away, or you offer yourself to be burned, sacrificed alive, and that's devotion, isn't it? We tend to think that must be the kind of Christians that God is looking for. But Paul says that if you do that without love, you have gained nothing. And that statement should stop us cold. Because Paul isn't talking about lazy Christians here.

He isn't talking about people who don't care. He's trying to get them to understand that there is nothing that they can do to please God if it isn't being driven by love. This is just so important to grasp first. John 4 says, Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. John doesn't say that God is loving, although he is.

It says that God is love. And that means that it is essential to his very being. And Jesus was the greatest display of love ever. John 15 says, Greater love has no one than this. That someone lay down his life for his friends.

That's exactly what Jesus did. He humbled himself by becoming a man. And he lived a perfect sinless life so that he could lay that life down for you, so that he could purchase your soul for eternity, so he could save you. God is love. And that means that love isn't some kind of an accessory to the Christian life.

It isn't some part of what we do it if we claim to be his. It is something that must very being. Not because we're earning God's favor. No, it's because our love is rooted in the very nature and character of the God who indwells us. Think about it.

When Jesus was asked to summarize the law, he said in Matthew 22, which Deacon Milton said earlier, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And he goes on and says, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. You see, our obedience flows from love. And if love is at the heart of who God is, if love is the foundation of his law, if love is the motivation behind Christ's sacrifice, then love must be at the very core of the Christian life. Now, are those other things important?

Absolutely right. We're called to be obedient. We're called to use our gifts for the good of the church. We're called to seek God and live righteous lives. All of those things matter.

But they have to be accompanied by love. Otherwise they're a total waste. See, love isn't optional. Paul makes that clear. Romans 13 owe no one anything except to love each other, fulfill the law.

Paul's argument here is that you can be impressive but empty. You can be busy but achieve nothing. You can look awesome to all of us and still be nothing in God's sight. And all of that forces us to ask a really important question. It didn't what am I doing for God?

It's what is driving what I'm doing, what is motivating what I'm doing. Because it isn't just about the outcome. God is Concerned with your heart. He's concerned with what is driving your actions. And that brings us to an important issue.

See, one thing that happens when you're a preacher is that you're always having to define words. It has its own vocabulary and there are all these important concepts like propitiation or hypostatic union or immutability or omnipotence, and on and on and on. They're big words that have very specific meanings. So when they come up, we always take the time to explain what they mean. But none of you are waiting for me to define love.

We're confident with that. We use the word all the time. We sing songs about it. Later this week we're going to have a holiday of sorts about it. But we need to be careful that we understand what the Bible means when, when it says love.

And this is made more complicated because the New Testament is translated from Greek to English. And if you don't speak multiple languages or you've never translated anything before, you might not realize that things don't always line up neatly from one language to another. And love is one of those things. See, we have one word in English for love, but in Greek they have four different words. And we have to be careful when we run into these because we have to understand which one it is.

And it can't be all of them. The first Greek word is storge. That's familial love, like a mother has for a child. The Bible doesn't talk much about that kind of love. Then there's Eros.

We get our word erotic from it. That is a romantic or sexual love. And it's the only love that God limits. He says that kind of love is to be between one man and one woman in the bounds of marriage. Then we have phileo.

That's a brotherly love. It's a love of friendship. It's about wanting to be with someone, about enjoying their presence. And that kind of love is important. The Bible talks quite a bit about it, but nowhere are we commanded to have phileo love, which makes sense.

You can't choose to enjoy hanging out with someone. And that leaves the fourth kind of love, and that is agape. That is the kind of love that Paul is talking about here. Now, you might have heard that word agape before in church, but what does it mean? See, agape love is a love of action.

It's about doing for the well being of others, even when it costs you something. And it isn't rooted in anything so trivial and shallow as attraction or Emotion. It doesn't ebb and flow based on how you feel on a given day. Agape love is rooted in commitment. That's why we can be commanded over and over and over again in scripture to have agape love for one another, because it's something that we have to do intentionally.

Jesus said in John 13, he said, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another just as I have loved you. You also are to love one another. By this. People will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another. That would make no sense if this kind of love was just a feeling.

You have to decide that you're going to agape love. You commit to it. So what are you committing to? Agape love is sacrificial. It willingly gives itself for the good of another, regardless of what they have done for you.

One of my favorite definitions for agape love comes from a theologian I won't name because he gets a bit wonky in other areas. But he says that agape love repays evil with good. He says that this form of love turns the other cheek. It does good to those who do harm to you. See, this kind of love is all about doing for the good of others, even when they have wronged you.

That's what Jesus did. When we sin, it is primarily against God. And we don't get that. We always focus on the horizontal offense first. So if I harm someone, let's say I walk out here, pick one of you, and just smack you.

I have some choices I'd like. No, I don't. That's horrible. If I do that, I have absolutely sinned against that person. But that isn't the worst of it.

My primary offense is against God. David captured this truth. He had slept with another man's wife. Then he killed that guy, had him murdered in order to hide it. And then in Psalm 51, he says, against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight?

See, when David said that, he wasn't denying the harm that he had caused others. He was identifying the root of his sin. Every act of disobedience is ultimately a rejection of God's rule and a violation of his holiness. That's what sin is. Your sin, my sin, it's primarily against God, which is why what God does is so staggering.

You have wronged him, and yet he pays the price for it. Agape love is a decision. It's something that you decide to do, and the less someone deserves it, the better you display it. And I want you to think about what this looks like in a church. See, whenever you pile a whole bunch of people together, there's always going to be people that you get along with, and it's going to be some that kind of rub you the wrong way.

That's who I want you to think about. And if you don't know anybody like that at church, think about someone at work or school or in your family. The person just rubs you the wrong way. And if you can't think of anybody, then everybody else is thinking about you right now.

If you agape love that person, you will for their good, and you will do so at great cost. And I think it can be helpful to think of extreme examples. Let's say there's a bully at work and you go to lunch and this guy comes over, he takes your food and spits in it. What would agape love do? Something sacrificial.

Something for their good. So maybe you buy them a gift card to a nice restaurant. That sounds insane, doesn't it? It sounds completely crazy. But agape love is extreme.

Think of another one. Let's say someone is a really bad guy. They broke into your house while you're here at church, steal every single thing that you have in it. All the furniture, not just the valuables, but the personal things that can never be replaced. The trinkets your kids made or photos of family.

And a year down the road, they catch the guy. Your stuff is long gone, the money is long spent. So they end up putting him in prison and he goes to trial. The guy's a habitual offender, so the judge throws the book at him and he gets 20 years. What would be the most agape thing you could possibly do for that man?

How about you step forward and say, I'll serve his sentence and let him go free? It sounds crazy, and obviously you can't do that. But I told that story for a reason, because that is exactly what Jesus did for you. See, in this story, you're not the victim, you're the criminal. And Christ stood up and said, I'll take his punishment.

And he didn't just serve time in a prison, he paid the ultimate price. He was tortured and executed and stepped in front of the wrath of God on your behalf. Romans 5:8 says, But God showed his love for us. And that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Not after we repented, not after we cleaned ourselves up while we were still sinners.

That isn't some kind of sentimental love. The father gave his son to Die in your place. He did what was good for us, despite the fact that we deserved wrath. We deserved hell. That is agape love, and that is the kind of love that we're supposed to show to one another.

And First Corinthians lays out exactly how we do that. Starting in verse four, it says, agape love is patient and kind. Are you patient with your fellow believers? Are you patient with people who grow slowly? The ones who just don't get it yet right there, they're part of God's people, but they just don't understand how that should impact their life.

Are you patient with them? Patient with the same struggles, the same immaturities again and again and again? Do you go out of your way to be kind towards them? Especially the ones where it doesn't come easy? Agape love does not envy or boast.

This was huge torrent. They were a church where everyone was jockeying for position and using their gifts for themselves, wanting to be celebrated. But if they love one another, they want to see others do well. They want to see others celebrated. And when it is them, they don't find joy in others celebrating them.

So do you look to lift others up here at Newt to encourage them to celebrate them, to put the spotlight on them? Agape love is not arrogant or rude. It does not talk down to people. It doesn't look at others who aren't as mature as you and wonder how they can be so blind or weak or foolish. It comes alongside them.

Agape love, it doesn't insist on its own way. This is a big one. Every time a church splits, every time there's a major issue, it almost always has to do with people feeling like their opinions aren't heard. That's how churches split over stupid stuff like paint colors and carpet. Everybody has an opinion about everything.

And no matter what decisions we make here at church, there's someone out there that thinks it's the wrong one every single time. That always means some people aren't getting what they want. But agape love says, hey, it's not about me. It's not about what I want. It's about God.

It's about his glory. It's about making much of his name. And it's okay if it doesn't go the way that I want to. I'm good with that. Agape love is an irritable, resentful.

So not only are you okay with things not going your way, you have a great attitude about it. You don't hold grudges. You be the bigger person. No matter how wrong the other guy was. Because it isn't about you.

It's about God. It's about his glory. It's about celebrating and magnifying Him. Agape love doesn't rejoice at wrongdoing, but but rejoices with the truth. Agape love is honest.

It holds fast to the truth and won't sacrifice it just to keep the peace. And then Paul stacks these five short phrases together that describe agape love's endurance. It says, agape love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. That isn't wedding poetry. This is Paul telling us that a healthy church needs to be drenched in love.

This is about sacrificing for others and being intentional to love them in real, tangible ways. Even when it costs you something. Especially when it costs you something. That's the love that Paul calls us towards. A sacrificial church, shaping love.

And then he continues. Because it isn't just enough to understand what love is. We need to understand why it's so important. So look at verse eight. Love never ends.

As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. This is the pinnacle of this chapter. Everything flows out of this staggering truth.

Love doesn't end. It has an eternal quality that nothing else does. Now, we're not a young congregation. If you look back at your life, you will see that you can't do things you used to do. And things that were important to you long in the past don't matter much anymore.

That's because everything has an expiration date except love. See, the church at Corinth was obsessed with these flashy gifts. And Paul doesn't say that love is more powerful than those gifts. It says that those gifts will cease. They will pass away.

The Word carries the idea of something becoming obsolete, not because it's bad, but because it has served its purpose. That's an important distinction. See, spiritual gifts are means, not ends. They're the scaffolding, not the building. They are tools that God uses now for the good of his church.

But love isn't just another tool. It's the eternal fabric of God's very character. God is love. And then he explains why these gifts are temporary, starting in verse nine. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

But when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. See, our knowledge is partial. Our understanding is limited. No matter how gifted you are, no matter how well you understand scripture, you're still seeing everything through a Keyhole. But the day is coming when we're going to understand it all.

And when it talks about the perfect coming, that is consummation, the day is coming when Christ will return, when our faith will be made sight. And at that moment, the gifts designed to help us navigate the brokenness of this age won't be necessary anymore. And you may have

heard that people say that the perfect is about the completion of the Bible. There is nothing in the text that fits that interpretation at all. It's really just a way that people have pushed back against some of the errors in the charismatic movement.

So they say, okay, we don't want that, so we're going to find a way to dismiss that scripturally, but we're going to look at that next week. The language that Paul uses here is clearly pointing to the end. There's no question about that. He gives us two illustrations, 11 through 13. He says, 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. I didn't. But a lot of you did, right? So for now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. He's not insulting the Corinthians here. He's just showing that people mature, and as they mature, their needs change. When he says face to face, that's end time language. Because the day is coming when we will be able to see the unseeable God.

You can read about that in Revelation 22. It says they will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads at that moment. When that occurs, we will know fully. And here's the point. Everything else ends.

All the spiritual gifts that people want so badly will one day be gone. But love is something you will never grow out of. That's why this is so important. And look at how Paul finishes this off. He says, now, faith, hope, and love abide these three.

But the greatest love you see, faith will one day give way to sight. All of our hopes will one day be fulfilled. But love will never end, because God will continue to be God and continue to be love. And we as his people will continue to reflect it through eternity. That is the weight of Paul's argument.

He's telling them that they are pouring into things and chasing after things that won't last, and they're neglecting the one thing that will last forever. You know, we look at things through the lens of today. And we value things based on what they do for us in the moment. That's why churches are always looking for talented people. But I want you to hear this.

A church can thrive without talent, but it cannot survive without love. And now all of this. This point has just been theory. We've unpacked the text, shown what love is, why love matters. But that isn't enough.

This isn't sentimental. This is calling us to action. First Corinthians 14:1 says, Pursue love, not admire, not debate, not in theory. It says to pursue it, to chase after it, to hunt it down. Because this kind of love isn't something that just happens.

It has to be intentional. You have to decide to love or you won't do it. So what does that look like for us? It means that you look for ways to do good for others in ways they haven't earned and in ways they can't repay. It's about being patient when someone is stomping on your last nerve.

It's speaking the truth with gentleness. Not to win arguments or to prove a point, but to celebrate truth. Real love never ignores truth. Don't buy into that lie. Love doesn't pretend sin isn't sin.

And it doesn't compromise what is right just to be nice. Love confronts, but it does so for correction and for restoration. Agape love means you put the needs of others above your own comforts, above your own preferences. It means you choose to serve even when it's inconvenient or when it presses against you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable. It means you refrain from bitterness or resentment even when somebody has wronged you.

And it means that you work to do good for others for no other reason than to reflect your Savior. Paul is calling us to make this the defining mark of our lives and the defining mark of our Church. The world will measure you by success and talent and accomplishment, but God measures by love. So here's the call this morning. Love one another.

Seek opportunities in the ordinary to love each other. Because love isn't always grand gestures. Often it's small, faithful, persistent actions. It's kind words or a thoughtful note or a helping hand. They may seem small, but in God's kingdom they have eternal weight.

So today, don't just admire love. Decide that you will pursue it and act on it and sacrifice for it and let your life reflect the God who died in your place. Have you please stand for our closing hymn. It's number four, 29 in the hymnal. They will know we are Christians by our love.