

### I. Introduction

- A. Today is the second message of a two-part series called “How to Be Spiritual Without Being a Freak.”
- B. Here are some more statistics. The Southern Baptist convention recently conducted a national survey of attitudes toward Christianity. Here are some findings:
  1. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement, 44% of Americans agreed. “Christians get on my nerves.”
  2. In 2004, 17% of Americans said they ‘never go to church’. Today, the figure has climbed, 22% of Americans never go to church.
  3. 61% say the God of the Bible is no different from the gods or spiritual beings depicted by world religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. That makes me scratch my head because Buddhist philosophy has no god and Hindus worship many.
  4. 79% of non-Christians say Christianity is more about organized religion than loving God and loving people.
  5. “These outsiders are making a clear comment that churches are not getting through on the two greatest commandments, to love God and love your neighbor,” says Scott McConnell, Associate Director of LifeWay Research [Southern Baptist]. “When they look at churches, they don't see people living out the faith.”
  6. Source: USA Today, Jan. 9, 2008. Viewed at: [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-01-09-unchurched-survey\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-01-09-unchurched-survey_N.htm)
- C. Something is sending people running away from Christianity as fast as their pluralistic legs can carry them.
- D. Last weekend I pointed out three factors for this.

### II. Three Factors

- A. *Factor one: People do what they want to do, and most people do not want to submit their lives to God for approval.*
  1. In fairness, this is the largest factor. This is what St. Paul called ‘the stumbling block of the Cross.’
  2. It is much more fashionable for every person to do what is right in his or her own eyes, so ‘See you later, Jesus.’
  3. Though factor one is, by far, the largest of three factors why people are abandoning Christianity, WHAT SURVEY REPORTS IT? How many people would be honest enough to say, “Yeah, the reason I want nothing to do with Jesus and God is because I want to be my own boss and can't stomach the idea of answering to God?” Who's going to give that answer?
  4. Now, it's way more fashionable to point to the many flaws in every church and say, “It's their fault.”
  5. So, let's call the wholesale abandonment of Christianity in American culture exactly what the Bible calls it.
    - a) *“And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;”* Romans 1:28
  6. But, we can't just leave it at that. Yes, factor one is the biggest reason, but it's not the only reason for the decline in American Christianity. In a sense, factor one is a given, it's universal, it has always been there, in every age. It is human nature.
  7. So, to look for an explanation, we need to add two more factors to explain the dwindling of Christianity.
- B. *Factor two: You.*
- C. *Factor three: Me.*
  1. We are supposed to adorn the gospel. We are supposed to be salt and light in an otherwise insipid and gloomy culture. We are supposed to live our life so men and women would grab hold of us and cry out the words of the old prophet Zechariah.
    - a) *“Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’”* Zechariah 8:23
  2. But, what will that take? It will take one crucial, all important, brutally distorted area of biblical teaching: LOVE.

### III. Love

- A. 79% of non-Christians say Christianity is more about organized religion than loving God and loving people.
- B. If you were here last weekend, you'll know I started with some unhappy statistics about Christianity in America. It is at an all time low and sinking lower every day.
- C. If that is the problem, which I believe it is—in terms of being factor two and factor three, then the solution seems really obvious and easy.
- D. Instead of sitting here being preached at, instead of singing songs, instead of building buildings, what we really should be doing is getting out into the community and loving people.
- E. That is exactly what many churches have done and it has not done one little bit to stop the exodus from the church.
- F. Why?
- G. Could it be that the idea of love most of us live with does not square with the idea of love taught in the Bible? Could it be that every time we try to reach the world with love, we wind up reaching out with something other than true biblical love?
- H. I think that's the case. I'd like us to turn to the central teaching in all the Bible on love, 1 Corinthians 13, the Love Chapter, the chapter you've heard at 75% of the weddings you've attended.

### IV. The Love Chapter

- A. Showing Love is more important than being BUSY for Jesus, verses 1-3.
  1. This paragraph comes from the book of first Corinthians, written by a great Christian leader named Paul. He wrote this as a letter to the Christians in an ancient Greek city called Corinth. The Christians in Corinth were great people, but they had gotten their priorities backward.
  2. One of their problems was that *they thought the ultimate expression of their Christianity was activity and service for God.* This activity and service for God focused on things like speaking in tongues, giving prophecies from God and exercising the spiritual gift of faith. So, one chapter earlier, chapter 12, discusses all of these spiritual gifts. God describes the different ways you can serve Him. He outlines what it looks like to be busy for Jesus.
  3. God is saying that all of your sacrifice and service for Jesus is fine, but it is not really the most important factor in your life. *The most important factor is not the quantity of your ACTIVITY, but the quality of your LOVE.* In fact, He ends His discussion of spiritual gifts by basically saying, “Spiritual activity is great, but here is something greater.”
  4. Paul writes that if you have all of these spiritual activities going on, but don't have love, you are nothing more than a

spiritual NOISEMAKER. God still loves you, but you have a long way to go.

5. Some of you have been Christians for 20 or 40 years, but you are mean, ornery, critical, negative and judgmental. Don't tell me how much money you gave, how many activities you've done, how many tracts you've passed out; if you're not a loving Christian, then you are chasing people away from Christianity. You probably don't see it happening and you most likely don't even get that I'm talking about you right now. You are that dysfunctional.
  6. What does a functional, healthy love life look like?
- B. Showing love makes you a walking rerun of the life of Jesus, verses 4-7.
1. This is the primary mission of your life. There are 15 qualities listed here. Eight are *negative* (what loving people don't do, listed in *italics*). Seven are positive (what loving people do). There are two translations below: Unbracketed text is NKJV, [bracketed text] is NASB.
    - a) suffers long, [patient]
    - b) kind, [kind]
    - c) *does not envy*, [*is not jealous*]
    - d) *does not parade itself*, [*does not brag*]
    - e) *is not puffed up*, [*is not arrogant*]
    - f) *does not behave rudely*, [*does not act unbecomingly*]
    - g) *does not seek its own*, [*does not seek its own*]
    - h) *is not provoked*, [*is not provoked*]
    - i) *thinks no evil*, [*does not take into account a wrong suffered*]
    - j) *does not rejoice in iniquity*, [*does not rejoice in unrighteousness*]
    - k) but rejoices in the truth, [but rejoices with the truth]
    - l) bears all things, [bears all things]
    - m) believes all things, [believes all things]
    - n) hopes all things, [hopes all things]
    - o) endures all things, [endures all things]
  2. The greatest demonstration of these fifteen qualities was Jesus, the ultimate lover.
  3. When Jesus is living in you and through you, then you will love just like He loved.
  4. Here is exactly where most Christians and most churches, (I don't care if you're young or old) make exactly the same mistake.
  5. That is to think you can, by your own power, run out and produce Jesus' kind of love. You can't. This love is a supernatural love. It is beyond you. If you don't get that, even your most sincere efforts are only going to chase a desperately lost world even farther from Jesus.

#### V. The Big Point

- A. Spiritual babies do not produce 1 Corinthians 13 love. Spiritual babies do not have the inner resources to do it. Your love takes on a self-serving quality and unbelievers smell it coming a mile away.
- B. That is why, if you read the Love Chapter correctly and in context, you will see something you might not have seen before. This chapter is not simply a plea for you to go forth and love. At an even deeper and a more important level, *this chapter is a plea for you grow up, for you to be mature in your life with God.*
- C. It is not mature Christians who scare people away from Jesus, it is immature Christians and it has nothing to do with how old you are. It has everything to do with how passionately you have committed yourself to your own spiritual growth over the years.
- D. I don't think there's another paragraph in Scripture that has suffered more misinterpretation than this one. Let's take it line by line.

#### VI. Here's an Overview

- A. *Love never fails* (verse 8). A simple reality. A PROMISE. It doesn't say that YOU will never fail. If you have built God's love into your soul, if you are letting Jesus express His life through you, then HIS LOVE FLOWING THROUGH YOU will not fail. It will not collapse and fall apart when you're tired, when you're stressed, when you're sick or when your pastor or church make decisions you don't like.
- B. It will not collapse and fall apart when the other person has morning breath, too many body piercing, spiked hair, smelly clothes, is too conservative, too old for you, too young for you, unattractive, uptight or wild and crazy. Your love is steady and strong even when someone is really difficult to love. YOU CAN HAVE A KIND OF LOVE THAT NEVER FAILS.
- C. Most of us have a breaking point. That's when the fifteen qualities evaporate faster than you can say, "I told you to put the seat down." You get critical, negative and condemnatory.
- D. But when God's supernatural love flows through you, there is no breaking point, because HIS love never fails and that is what you offer the world. How? Simple. Grow up.
- E. We can put the rest of this chapter into two columns.

##### Spiritual Immaturity

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##### UNSTABLE LOVE

But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away.  
For we know in part and we prophesy in part.

##### CHILDISH LOVE

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child;

##### Spiritual Maturity

Love never fails.

##### STABLE LOVE

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

##### NOBLE LOVE

But\* when I became a man, I put away childish things.

ABSORBED WITH SELF  
For now we see in a mirror, dimly,

CONCERNED FOR OTHERS  
but\* then face to face.

SHALLOW RELATIONSHIPS  
Now I know in part,

DEEP RELATIONSHIPS  
but\* then I shall know [fully] just  
as I also am known [fully].

\*Each SHIFT is introduced with the exact same Greek word, the mildly adversative conjunction *de* [de] translated “but.”

VII. Four Transformations when you move from Spiritual babyhood to Spiritual adulthood.

A. From UNSTABLE LOVE to STABLE LOVE.

1. *But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away (verse 8).*

- a) Prophecy, tongues and knowledge refer to spiritual gifts, which are the basis of Christian service and activity. What do they have to do with love?
- b) The three verbs describe how much LOVE mileage you will get when your tank is filled with ACTIVITY instead of MATURITY.
- c) The verbs are: 1) they will fail; 2) they will cease; 3) it will vanish away. This verse is NOT saying that at some point in history God will stop giving these spiritual gifts. Instead, this verse is a warning. It warns that if you base your LOVE LIFE on ACTIVITY instead of MATURITY, then your spiritual life is going to flame out. You will have UNSTABLE LOVE. Why?

2. *For we know in part, and we prophecy in part (verse 9).*

- a) Have you ever seen a five year old kid with teeth missing? Paul is talking about that state when you’ve got spiritual teeth missing; when you’re not fully grown.
- b) ‘In part’ refers to a partially formed spiritual life. Sanctification that has teeth missing. Gaps in your maturity, in your ‘Grace Lineup of the Soul.’ ‘In part’ is a phrase for spiritual immaturity.
- c) He is saying we can produce service for God (gifts of prophecy and knowledge) from an immature spiritual life—but it won’t help God’s cause. That is not a good basis for a LOVE that NEVER FAILS. It is UNSTABLE LOVE. Then the shift.

3. *But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away (verse 10).*

- a) Let’s go really slowly.
- b) But when something happens. What?
- c) When that which is perfect has come. What’s that? The Greek word translated ‘perfect’ [*teleios*, *teleios*] occurs two other times in this book. Same word, but in those two places it isn’t translated ‘perfect,’ it’s translated ‘mature.’

(1) *“However, we speak wisdom among those who are MATURE, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.” 1 Corinthians 2:6, NKJV*

(2) *“Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be MATURE.” 1 Corinthians 14:20, NKJV*

(3) In both of the other places, this word is translated MATURE, not PERFECT. That’s how it should be translated here. *When MATURITY has come, then IMMATURITY will evaporate.* Instead of an UNSTABLE LOVE, you will have STABLE LOVE. The only thing that goes away is the INSTABILITY.

d) Everything in the passage only makes sense when you take out the word ‘perfect’ and insert the word ‘mature’.

e) Here’s what I’m saying; the reason you are factor two and I am factor three is not that we are sending *unloving* Christians into the world. It is that we are sending into the world *immature* Christians, baby Christians who make a lot of noise but have no depth. Spiritual kindergartners. That’s what we’re sending into the world and their love is unstable and fickle.

f) The world looks at them and says, “You are a bunch of freaks and I want nothing to do with you.”

g) Which makes it so crucial that you grow up in the Lord.

(1) There are two primary interpretations of this verse. One interprets the word ‘perfect’ as the coming of the Lord. This is the eschatological interpretation. The other view interprets ‘perfect’ to refer to the completion of the Bible, the closed canon of Scripture. This is the ceessionist interpretation. The ceessionist interpretation is hard to support. By far, the majority of interpreters subscribe to the eschatological interpretation. But why introduce the end times in a chapter on love? It doesn’t really make sense.

(2) I am arguing that NEITHER of these interpretations, though grammatically allowable, fits the passage, the context or the flow of the argument.

(3) The Greek word *teleios*, routinely refers to spiritual maturity, and translating it that way here really unlocks the riches of this chapter. The point is not that some kind of abstract ‘love’ never fails. The main point is the relationship between love and maturity, and that a mature Christian’s love is rigorous and never fizzles out no matter how hard you are pushed.

B. From CHILDISH LOVE to NOBLE LOVE

1. *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 (verse 11).*

- a) Do you see how this is a plea for you to grow up? How it’s about maturity first and love second?
- b) Immature Christians display a CHILDISH LOVE. Your speaking, your understanding and your thinking are all childish.

- c) So your love is fragile and it quickly shifts into self absorption.
- d) But mature Christians display a NOBLE LOVE. Quiet, steady, passionate and strong. Manly love, womanly love, that can withstand any hardship and not collapse.
- e) I'm begging you to leave childish things behind and accept the mantle of Spiritual Adulthood.
- f) I especially want to talk to you young adults and high school students, here or at The Well. I'm begging you not to mistake *activity* for *maturity*.
- g) Activity comes in bursts, like a sprint. But maturity comes slow and steady, like a marathon.
- h) Immature activity draws attention to yourself, but mature activity draws attention to Jesus.
- i) Church, it's time to put away childish things.
- j) That's my passion for you. That's my calling in this world. You can't live like Christ unless you grow up like Christ, think like Christ and believe like Christ. You can't live like Christ until you have the same structure of thinking, feeling and perspective in your mind that Christ had in His mind. That requires the Bible.
- k) Let me tell you how I express my love for you. In two ways: 1) by studying and teaching God's Word, so that week after week, I can lay out for you a rich feast of the whole counsel of God; 2) by leading our church so that there are enough places for you to connect. So if anybody in our church falls through the cracks, it's only because you've chosen to. When you know God deeply, through His word, and love one another profoundly, through your relationships with one another, that's when you grow mature. That's when you can go into the world as an ambassador for Christ. That is my mission in life. I hope it's yours, too.

#### C. From SELF-ABSORPTION to CONCERNED FOR OTHERS.

1. *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 (verse 12).*
  - a) "Now [in a state of immaturity], we see in a mirror dimly, but then [when maturity comes] face to face."
  - b) Question 1: When you are looking in a "mirror", who are you looking at? YOURSELF.
  - c) Question 2: When you are looking "face to face" who are you looking at? SOMEONE ELSE.
  - d) When you are immature, you focus on yourself. Sorry, it's just the way it is. You really can't help yourself. What do people think of me? Am I impressing them? Do I look good? What are they saying about me? And then I did this for Jesus and that for Jesus and my family is so perfect. Silly me, I've talked about myself for long enough, now you tell me what you think of me.
  - e) Yeah, you spit out spasms of love and concern for others, but they don't last.
  - f) Your ability to stay focused on other people's needs depends on how much you have grown up in the Lord. Love depends on growth. I am not making this up. It's right here; it's the core teaching of this chapter.

#### D. From SHALLOW RELATIONSHIPS to DEEP RELATIONSHIPS.

1. *"Now [in a state of immaturity] we know in part."* Immature people have shallow relationships, you need to keep up appearances, you have to wear masks.
2. *"But then [when maturity comes], I shall FULLY KNOW just as also I am FULLY KNOWN."* Steady spiritual growth, good love life, DEEP relationships, solid connections. That's the promise. That's when you are fully known. When you've got nothing to hide, nothing to prove and you know you're able to give and receive love anyway.
3. That is advanced love. That is Biblical love. That is loving God and loving the world Jesus' way.
4. *And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love (verse 13).*
5. *"Now the purpose [telos, the finishing touch] of the commandment [the Christian way of life] is LOVE from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith."* Timothy 1:5, NKJV
6. This is the love that abides or endures when times get hard. Let me say this: Your love doesn't really count until you are loving people you don't feel like loving. Any old lame brain can love their friends. When you love someone whose music is too loud, whose armpits stink, whose piercings and hair don't sit right with you and whose sexual ethics, language and style offend you then the world sits up and takes notice.
7. When you love the unlovable, you're loving the way Jesus wants you to love.

#### VIII. Conclusion

- A. Why is today's church shrinking? Different reasons and its mostly out of our control. But the big reason is this, most Christians never grow up. They settle for a shallow faith with a wimpy Savior. They mistake activity for reality. They're up and down. They are no different from their unsaved friends. They have no sense of stability, transcendence, depth or reality. Nobody looks at them and says, "I want what they have."
- B. You become self-serving, pouty, whiny and scared.
- C. Or you become legalistic, self-righteousness and always offended by something, or wounded by somebody.
- D. Or you become angry and hostile, only you call it righteousness.
- E. Hypocrite. Freak.
- F. No amount of activity, ministry or mission work can cover up the gaps in your teeth.
- G. You'll fool your church friends, but you'll never fool your unsaved neighbors.
- H. I am standing here today because mature men and women, people of deep faith who believed in a Great God and had a great Love for Scripture, spoon fed me the Bible and embraced me as a person, so that one day, a little Italian boy met a Savior named Jesus.
- I. Will you be that mature man, that mature woman? Will you dedicate yourself, not to activity for Jesus, but for maturity in Jesus and then the love that flows out of that?
- J. That's the American church's only hope. Back to the Bible. Back to the Cross. Back to prayer. Back to Jesus.