

Hello Listeners; It doesn't take very long to get from Genesis 2 to Genesis 3. You just have to turn the page, and you go from Adam rejoicing when God presented him with his wife, celebrating their unity as husband and wife, saying, This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, to Adam calling Eve, The woman, and blaming her and God for his sin.

That gives us a very clear picture of what sin has done to us, how it completely changed our focus, from being on each other, to being on ourselves. How it twisted our way of thinking about ourselves and our place in the world. Sin shattered the unity that Adam and Eve had enjoyed as husband and wife. God had made them one in marriage, but sin made them two again. And not simply two separate people, but two selfish people, two people who now instinctively, automatically, constantly, thought about themselves, and looked out for themselves.

And in Adam's mind, in that instant, Eve became, the woman. The woman whom You gave me, God. You might say, He opened his mouth, and that's what came out. He didn't have to think about it; it came straight from his heart; that was just how he felt and how he thought about Eve.

That's what sin does to us. Our sin is always working to separate us from one another.

Now when Paul wrote I Corinthians 13, he was writing to the congregation in Corinth, and he was addressing exactly the same problem that Adam and Eve had, once they had fallen into sin. The problem of what sin does to our unity. God creates unity. Sin creates division.

Paul admonishes them about it again and again in the letter. In chapter 3 He criticizes it in the most devastating way he possibly could: Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ . . . . for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving only in a human way?

You couldn't criticize Christians more harshly than to say that they are of the flesh. Because that says that we're denying our very identity. Because it means that we're giving our sin room to work in the church; it means that our life as a congregation shows that the power of sin is at work in our hearts and lives.

Paul talks about some ugly things in this letter. He had to talk about sexual immorality, and people who ate food sacrificed to idols. But this is when he says, You are of the flesh – when he's talking about the divisions, the strife, the conflict in the congregation.

Throughout the letter, Paul uses several different images to help the Corinthians to recognize the real identity and character of the church. You are God's field; God's building; God's temple. But one of the most wonderful images that he uses for the church is in chapter 12: You are the body of Christ, he says.

This is the glory of what Christ does in the lives of believers: He makes us live together as members of one body. He makes us care for each other and live for each other, and serve each other. This is the trademark of Christ's work. This is what His redeeming work looks like. Where you see unity, self-denial, people serving each other, you're seeing Christ at work; you're seeing the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul lists all the gifts that the people of Corinth had received: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues. But what stood out in the life of the church was disunity and division. Because they were competing and quarrelling with each other and trying to get the most important place in the worship service to display their gifts.

And Paul says to them, That shows that you don't understand who you are, what the church is; you don't understand what Christ is working for among you. When the Lord Jesus was with His disciples in the last hours before He was arrested, He said to them, By this all men will know that you are My disciples: if you love one another. That's how the world will know that you are not of the flesh; that's how people will be able to identify you as followers of Christ. John says in I John 3, We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. And he says in I John 4, No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. In other words, if we love each other, people will be able to see what God is like by looking at us.

And this is why I Corinthians 13 is so important, for the church, and, for you. Because it teaches us what we so often forget about our identity as believers. The church isn't a trainload of lucky people who all get to go to heaven instead of hell. The church is the body of Christ. And the thing that identifies us, over against the world, is our love for each other. This is the most excellent way.

Paul describes Christian love here. Not the movie kind of love; not the sentimental kind of love that's all about how you feel, that comes and goes. Real love that imitates, mirrors, God's love. It's your commitment to each other, and you show it in self-denial. 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.

That's the character of Christian love. Maybe I shouldn't say it that way. Because the truth is that that's the character of love, period. Of real love. Love makes you set yourself aside, and reach out for each other. It makes you seek each other's joy, happiness, wellbeing. You serve. And in your love, you defend each other, you defend your relationship against everything that your sin can throw at it.

Sin is like a predator; sin is always looking for an opening, for an opportunity, to make a kill, to destroy our lives. When Cain got angry, because God accepted Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's, God warned him: Sin is crouching at your door, and it desires to have you. Our sin shows itself in impulse to serve ourselves and defend ourselves and look out for ourselves, in our expectation that the people around us, our wives, our husbands, our friends, should be doing whatever they can to make me happy. Our sin is like a crowbar, like a wedge that Satan wants to drive between us, and pry us apart from each other.

And love goes up against our sin, to rescue us from ourselves. Love is patient, and kind. So, when someone makes a mistake, when someone sins against you, you can do what comes naturally. You can act like people of the flesh, in a human way. Get all offended and angry. Criticize. Or, you can love each other. You can be patient, and kind.

Love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant. Envy and boasting are marks of people who put themselves and what they want at the centre of all their concerns. That's why they can't be happy when the Lord gives good things to other people. They're too busy thinking about what they want to have. What they want is just too important. People who are arrogant have an awful hard time with sin, whether it's their own sin or the sin

that someone else commits against them. They're too proud to repent. They make excuses for their sin. They can't admit that they did anything wrong. And they can't forgive either. They're too important to let someone else get away with offending them.

All of these things say, I'm more important than us. What I feel, what I want, what I need, is all more important than our relationship. And you can choose to act that way. But that's not love. Love does not envy or boast; love is not arrogant.

Love is not rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It's so easy to be rude when things don't go my way. When people don't take me and what I want into account. Then I can nag, or I can sulk, or I can give other people the silent treatment, until I get my way. I can fly off the handle and start slamming doors. And I can file away in my memory all the ways other people have ever disappointed me, all the ways they've just plain sinned against me. Then sin is crouching at my door, and its desire is for me. But I can master my sin. And love my neighbour, the way God loves me.

Love doesn't tell everyone else all the wrong and foolish things someone did. Love wants to see the power and the influence of the gospel at work in your neighbour's life; love wants to see grace abounding more and more; love wants to see the Lord Jesus winning the victory over sin in your neighbour's life. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

Love is never exhausted; it's never worn out, no matter what happens. That couldn't be true, if love is nothing more than an emotion. But love is a commitment, and a desire to see the other person blessed and happy. And it's never concerned about itself. So you don't keep a record of everything that you've ever done for someone else. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Literally, Paul says something like this: Love protects in all things; it trusts in all things; it hopes in all things; it perseveres in all things. In all things means, in all situations. In all conditions. No matter what may happen, love bears it, love trusts, love hopes; love endures; it keeps on going. Our love is God's love being reflected, and worked out, between us. So nothing can make Christian love give up.

That's more than we can give each other. We shouldn't imagine that we can do this, love each other, all by ourselves. What comes naturally to us is the opposite of love. We can only love each other by grace, through faith. Love is a gift that only God can give us. So we have to pray for it. Once, when Jesus' disciples couldn't cast a demon out of a little boy, Jesus said, this kind only comes out with prayer. It's the same with real love: the only way we can ever begin to really love other people is through prayer.

This is the most important love advice that anyone can give you: starting today, ask the Lord Jesus every day to show that He lives and works in you, by making this love live in you, so that you can love the people around you in your home and family, in your church and your workplace, and in your community.

Thank you for listening – until next week..