**If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2If I have the gift of prophecy and know all the mysteries and have all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3If I give away everything I own, and if I give up my body that I may be burned but do not have love, I gain nothing. 4Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy. It does not brag. It is not arrogant. 5It does not behave indecently. It is not selfish. It is not irritable. It does not keep a record of wrongs. 6It does not rejoice over unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth. 7It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8Love never comes to an end. But if there are prophetic gifts, they will be done away with; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be done away with. 9For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, 10but when that which is complete has come, that which is partial will be done away with. 11When 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 put away childish things. 12Now we see indirectly using a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I was fully known. 13So now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.**

If you had to guess when the apostle Paul said these words, what would you say? Maybe in the middle of a wedding? That’s where we usually hear them. Maybe the Apostle Paul was doing some pre-marriage counseling with two lovebirds about to start their lives together? Or doing an anniversary service for a couple that have been together for 20 or 30 or 40 years?

Those are the kind of contexts where we often hear and read and reflect on these verses – which is wonderful, and completely appropriate. But it might surprise you to learn the actual context of the love chapter of the bible. Paul actually pens these beautiful words from God, sandwiched right in the middle of two chapters about people using their God given spiritual gifts. Using the gifts God gave you in love. You see, the Corinthians had been blessed with many different gifts. Some even were given the gift of speaking in tongues. In a miraculous way, God gave them words to say. Some saw that special gift as the best gift or *the* mark of the church. They thought of themselves as the top tier – Christians on a higher level.

In this section of his letter Paul reminds the Corinthians what the real mark of a Christian is – it’s exactly what Jesus said in our Gospel reading today: **“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, *if you have love for one another*.”** Love is the identifying mark of Christianity.

And so, in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul goes on to show the Corinthians (and us) that the gifts you have or the things you do are empty, if love isn’t a part of them. God wants more than outward appearances – he’s after our whole hearts. And if the action is there, but love isn’t, that’s not our whole heart. That action, that gift is not complete. Its empty. It’s just noise. A noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. God says we could have the most amazing gifts in the world – an incredible understanding of God’s word, a faith that can move mountains, for the Corinthians the spiritual gifts they were bragging about – but without love you’re missing something. Really, you’re missing everything. Without love all these wonderful things fall apart because love is really what they are built on. God’s love for us. If we don’t reflect that or show that then we really aren’t showing what Jesus said is the mark of the Christian church.

And so, Paul goes on to show us now, what love is. It’s something beautiful and unique – in a class all by itself. And here when we’re talking about love, we’re talking about love that’s real love. Not watered down, not with a change of definition like the world often presents it, like that you see on tv where the world love is interchangeable with passion or sex or lust for someone. No, not that. And not a two-sided contract either, the way we often treat it.

No, here the Apostle Paul defines love for us the way God does. So we can see it and show it the way God does. And the Apostle Paul uses the same word for love in Greek here, that God uses when he talks about his love for us. *Agape*. That one-sided love that loves fully and completely. Never dependent on how it’s received. Given fully every time, with nothing held back. Absolutely perfect. This is love: **“Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy. It does not brag. It is not arrogant. 5It does not behave indecently. It is not selfish. It is not irritable. It does not keep a record of wrongs. 6It does not rejoice over unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth. 7It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”**

I’m guessing after hearing these words there are a lot of different emotions going around right now. I’m sure some are very positive emotions: An appreciation for these simple but so profoundly beautiful words. Maybe some are feeling a sense of nostalgia – a warm fuzzy feeling, as you remember hearing these words at a wedding, maybe your own. Perhaps, thankfulness for the people who have shown you love in your life; an imperfect, but in those moments, wonderful reflection of the perfect love God has for you. I’m sure we have some of these nice thoughts and feelings as we hear these words today.

But as we hear these words, maybe we have some difficult feelings too. Maybe for some these words are kind of hard to hear. Maybe they are from your wedding, or from your parents wedding, or your child’s wedding; and that marriage didn’t last.

Maybe you hear these words and there’s a sense of longing there – a sense of something missing. I felt that way a lot when I was single. I thought this was something I wouldn’t have or didn’t have. Maybe some are feeling that way too. Spoiler alert – you do have this kind of love, because this is the love God has for you. But it’s still hard. It’s still hard when you want to share your life with someone and you don’t have that.

And I think for all of us here, single, happily married, not as happily married, widowed, divorced – there’s probably a lot of guilt too. God uses his law as a mirror, and as beautiful as these words are – they also show me my sin.

“Love is patient and kind.” Has anyone here had a hard time being patient in a marriage between two sinful people? Or in any kind of relationship with two sinful people?

“Love is not jealous. Not irritable. Not selfish.” How many here have ever heard your spouse ask you for help, but pretended like you didn’t?

“Love keeps no record of wrongs.” This is one of those things we want everyone do for us, but we have such a hard time doing for others. Because it has to do with forgiveness. We tell our spouse, our friend, someone, I forgive you. And in that word is the picture that now there’s nothing coming between us anymore. Your debt of sin against me is gone. We’re not going to count it. But then as soon as that situation happens again, we somehow manage to remember all of those old things that we said we would forget. And it goes the other way too. It hurts when someone says they forgive us, but then bring up past mistakes.

“Love never comes to an end.” Maybe this statement hurts the most because we remember those sad times where it seems like love did come to an end. That relationship is broken. That friendship is over. And it makes us wonder – just what am I reading here? Is this a promise from God, or just fluffy words that sound nice?

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus said something that helps us remember these aren’t just fluffy words. Jesus tells us something so wonderful, but so short maybe we missed it. Or maybe we just need to hear it again. That’s always true because we always need to hear God’s reassuring promises again. This is what Jesus says: Jesus says love…**”as I have loved you.”** That’s the lens that we’re looking through when we think about love.

Think of when Jesus said those words. Do you know when he said those words? The night before he died. And who did he say those words to? His disciples who were all going to abandon him. Who all promised they all did love him, so much they would die for him and never leave him. But who Jesus knew would do those very things in only a few hours.

They didn’t deserve Jesus’ love. If love was just a contract between two people for as long as it’s beneficial to both parties, the way our world so often treats it, Jesus had every right to say no, this relationship is over. But he didn’t. He still said those words. Even knowing everything about them, he told his disciples he loved them. He agape loved them. And he commanded them: “Love …as I have loved you.”

In 1 Corinthians 13, God reminds us how Jesus DOES love us! Love that he showed perfectly to imperfect people. And that he still delights in showing to us again and again, every single time. Even when we fail him, when we fail to love perfectly, even when we fail to use our gifts in Christian love – Jesus loves you. *“Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. Jesus does not envy. He does not brag. He is not arrogant. He does not behave indecently. He is not selfish. He is not irritable. He does not keep a record of wrongs.”*

In Jesus we see perfect love. Perfect love toward you and toward me, and toward the entire world. Jesus loves you perfectly and fully. It’s in Jesus and his actions toward us that we really see and understand what love is! God tells us in 1st John 4: **“This is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”**

God loves you so much that he chose to live as one of us, for all of us. Jesus lived a perfectly loving life. Toward God, toward his neighbor. And the record of wrongs that stands against us and condemns us – the wrongs that we have committed against other people, but ultimately against God – Jesus took that record and counted it toward himself instead. On the cross, he paid the price of hell our sins deserve. He paid for our record of wrongs, so that it wouldn’t be counted against us. So that God would remember our sin no more.

That’s what God promises you because of Jesus. That’s how Jesus has loved you! Perfectly and completely! Knowing that we didn’t bring anything to this relationship. Knowing that because of our sin we will still fall short, just like the disciples did that very same night after Jesus gave that command to love. That’s the awesome thing about Jesus’ love. About Agape love. It isn’t about you! It’s all about him, and what he did for you.

Jesus love never comes to an end. That’s the really cool thing about love, about God’s love. That’s what those final verses in this chapter are talking about. Almost everything else is eventually going to end. The world we live in is going to come to an end someday. The possessions we have aren’t going to come to heaven with us. Even the spiritual gifts God gives us – there’s going to come a time when they aren’t needed anymore. We aren’t going to need to convert people in heaven.

But while many things will end, there are some that won’t: faith – we’ll still trust in God as our Savior when we’re in heaven. Hope – we will still have that sure hope of salvation in Christ. We have it now, but in heaven it will be fully realized. And the greatest of the three, because without it you really can’t have the other two – love. Because of Jesus, we will get to enjoy the perfect love of our Savior God forever.

And that completely changes how we approach and understand and show love in our lives right now! We are reminded that we are recipients of the greatest love ever: the love God has for us. Out of thanks we want to show that love to other people too – remember, love is the true mark of Christianity! The times we are most like our Savior are the times we’re reflecting the love our Savior showed to us.

And so, our prayer is that God would help us to love like Jesus. To keep ruling in our hearts and continue to make us more like our Savior. To be patient and kind. To not be selfish. To not keep records of wrongs. And to comfort us with the knowledge that even when we fail to love perfectly, his love for us will never come to an end. Amen.