

February 2, 2025. Sermon  
1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Loving the Unlovable. Many of you have experienced new neighbors. Good ones and bad ones. The bad ones. The word to describe them would be "coarse." There is loud music day and night along with a constant flow of obscenities. They urinated in the front yard in broad daylight. They totally disrupted your peace. You could see nothing good in them.

You asked the Lord to help you be more loving, but all you got back from the neighbors was disgust and rejection. The crisis came when you returned home to discover that your neighbors' children had sprayed orange paint all over her beautiful patio—the walls, the floors—everything! You are furious. You tried to pray but found yourself crying out, "I cannot love them; I hate them!"

To love the unlovable! Psalm 71 is an individual lament. It's suitable for a faithful person who is in danger. The psalmist's enemies plan to hurt him by taking advantage of his weaknesses. The Hebrew word for cruel suggests leaven or yeast, and just like yeast ferments, the wickedness of the psalmist enemies was fermenting. It get deeper and deeper under your skin. You hate them!

How do we love the unlovable? How do we love those who want to harm us? The psalmist reminds us to take refuge in God, the God who has protected us even in our mother's womb, Psalm 22:10. "Do not be far from me, O my God make haste to help me." (Psalm 71:12)

***"I admit that this means loving people who have nothing lovable about them. But then, has oneself anything lovable about them? s (p. 120)." Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis***

"What does he mean that there is nothing lovable in me? What do you mean God made it that way so I would be able to love the unlovable in others?" We all want the beauty of the gospel without the discomfort. But it is there. Right in front of all of us.

1 Corinthians 13 presents us with one of the most difficult challenges we will ever face: loving the unlovable. The Apostle Paul has heard that the congregation he had founded had divided into two factions: those who like Paul and those who like other leaders and a confrontation regarding which is the better spiritual gift. What a situation! Paul is telling them to put away their childish ways. Quit requiring people to agree with you or affirm your actions. We all have experienced those situations in life.

The reason Paul's words resonate even today is that in life there are likely to be impatient, unkind, jealous, boastful, arrogant, and rude people who insist on getting their own way and seem to take pleasure in behaving badly. These are the *wolves* in our lives. They are the types of people Paul wrote about in Romans 1:29-31 where he mentions "gossips," "slanderers," "haters of God," "insolent," "haughty," "boastful," "inventors of evil," "disobedient to parents," "foolish," "faithless," "heartless," and "ruthless." I cannot read these verses without thinking that Paul must have worked in challenging situations that we know.

In his book, *Christians on the Job: Winning at Work without Compromising Your Faith*, Dr. David Goetsch tells the story of Maria, a young woman who struggled to show Christian love to someone who was unlovable. Maria's father was a pastor who taught her that putting 1 Corinthians 13 into action meant treating people the way she wanted to be treated. Up to now, she had always followed her father's advice and benefitted from doing so. But having to deal with a coworker who was self-serving, dishonest, entitled, and manipulative was testing her commitment to 1 Corinthians 13. Maria was finding it difficult to show Christian love to someone who was so unlovable.

Maria knew she was supposed to be long-suffering, kind, and patient with this wolf in sheep's clothing, but what she wanted more than anything was to give her coworker a piece of her mind. If not that, she wanted to at least avoid her. Instead, she reflected on the love of Christ, and his example. We love the unlovable!

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One of the best ways to shine the light of Christ for others is to set an example that reflects His image in how we see our life with others, just like Maria. Ideally, when others see us in action, they will see a reflection of Christ.

Lessons abound in 1 Corinthians 13 for those of us who are called to set a Christ-like example in the workplace, with our family and friends. Verse 1 tells us that no matter how honestly, we speak if our words are not spoken in love, they are like a "noisy gong" or a "clanging cymbal." Paul tells just how useless, and destructive are spiritual gifts when not applied from the standpoint of love.

When responding to those who treat us badly, remember the admonition in Proverbs 25: 21 – 22 where we are told to feed our enemy if they are hungry and give them water if they are thirsty. This verse reminds us that doing these things will "heap burning coals" on the head of our adversary on the one hand and bring us rewards from God on the other. It is a metaphor for repaying evil with good! Leading them perhaps to feel the inward burning pangs of guilt. Something good may come out of those burning coals.

The story I shared with you at the beginning of the message was a true story about a missionary couple returning home for some rest. How did she handle the situation? She had to deal with the sin in her heart, so she began to converse with the Lord in her inner being, and a Scripture came to mind: ***"And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity"*** (*Colossians 3:14 NASB*). In her heart she questioned, "Lord, how do I put on love?" The only way she could picture it was like putting on a coat. So that is what she determined to do—she

chose to wrap herself in the love of God! As a result, she began to experience a deeper life of Christ within her.

She made a list of what she would do if she really loved her exasperating neighbors, then did what she had listed. She baked cookies, she offered to baby-sit for free, she invited the mother over for coffee—and the most beautiful thing happened! She began to know and understand them. She began to see that they were living under tremendous pressures. She began to love her "enemies." She did good to them. She lent to them without expecting anything back. The day came when they moved—and she wept! An unnatural, unconventional love and captured her heart—a supernatural love—the love of Jesus.

God's truth always unravels in the very personal parts of our life struggles. When we walk to God's truth through these questions and struggles, then even when the answers are offensive, they will bring awkward comfort that leaves us trusting God more. The Psalmist helps us here, ***"My mouth is filled with your praise and with your glory all day"***. Let's put the coat of Christ on us, so that we can understand his love. Amen.