



This morning we continue our series of messages from I Corinthians 13, with today's message, titled *Always*.

*Always* is an interesting word. As I spend a lot of time in my car, I listen to the radio quite a bit. There are some songs that I will *always* listen to, even though I have heard them many, many times. I will *always* listen to *Let It Be*, by the Beatles, *My Sweet Lord*, by George Harrison, and *Landslide*, by Fleetwood Mac. Those songs *always* move me and I never tire of listening to them. Others, however, will *always* cause me to change the channel. *Freebird*, by Lynyrd Skynyrd or *Stairway to Heaven* by Led Zeppelin will *always* prompt a change of channel. It's not that they aren't great songs – they are – but, for some reason, I don't need to hear them any more.

I Corinthians 13 is a passage of Scripture that *always* moves me. No matter how many times I hear it, no matter how many times I read it, it is *always* a welcomed experience. I have returned to the New International Version this week, even though I said I would use a different version each week. The NIV uses the word from which I take my title this morning – *always*. I read through a lot of other versions this week and love them, but they have different ways of expressing verse 7, which says that love *always* protects, *always* trusts, *always* hopes, *always* perseveres. I appreciate that Paul provides a 4-point outline for my message this morning, and I appreciate that he binds those points together with the word *always*. *Always*. That's a powerful word, isn't it? It is a reminder that love is *always* true and *always* the standard by which we are to live. Admittedly, we don't *always* follow love, however. I know I don't, and I'm fairly certain you don't either. That's not to critique myself or anyone else; it is simply an acknowledgement of our humanity, and part of the reality of our humanity is that we do not *always* demonstrate love. At times, yes, but not *always*. Sometimes we are overcome by pettiness, small-mindedness, vindictiveness, and all sorts of other behaviors and attitudes that fall far short of the ideal of love. And I sometimes wonder, in this very transient day and age in which we live, can the word *always* apply to much of anything? I certainly hope so, but I fear that it is less and less true that it does.

Follow along as I read I Corinthians 13 – (New International Version).

*1 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*

*2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

*3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.  
5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.  
6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.  
7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.  
8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.  
9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part,  
10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.  
12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.  
13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

### *Love Always Protects*

In this dangerous, violent world, protection is something that is often on our minds, especially self-protection. A great deal of money is spent these days on equipment we hope will provide us with a greater degree of protection. Here at the church we have been taking steps to provide a greater protection, including a soon-to-be installed system of security cameras. I'll be honest with you and say this – you can't imagine how much I would rather not install that system. I would so much rather see that money used for ministry purposes but there are some realities that we now have to consider, and providing security for everyone who comes into our facility is one of those realities.

Increasingly, people are taking steps to secure their safety, including carrying weapons. My father, who was a steelworker for many years, was also a gunsmith, so I grew up with a lot of guns around our family, and when I was young I used guns for sporting purposes, such as skeet shooting and target shooting, and I own guns that were built by my father so can say that I understand the attraction of weapons as a means of protection. My thought about *any* steps of protection is this, however – mostly what those steps do is give us a *sense* of protection, even though there is no *guarantee* of protecting ourselves against the dangers and violence in this world. What the past few decades have proven, I believe, is that we live more under the *illusion* of protection than the *guarantee* of protection, and this has been reinforced by the tragedy at the synagogue in Pittsburgh yesterday and two episodes in our own area – the tragedy of two people killed at a Kroger store in Louisville and the threats of violence made against schools here in Shelby County and Anderson County. The reality is, no security system will guarantee our protection. No weapon will guarantee our protection. I don't say any of this to cause unnecessary worry and anxiety about potentialities or to play upon our fears, but to speak what I believe to be a truth with which we must grapple, and it is the truth that protection is very difficult, but we must not allow what is happening in our world to paralyze us with fear.

But there is another element to protection as well, a very important element and it is this – we are called to offer protection to those who are vulnerable and those who populate the category that Jesus describes in Matthew 25:31-46 as *the least of these*. Take some time to read that passage this week, and note that Jesus reminds us – commands us, in fact – to protect those who are vulnerable and those who struggle. (31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 34 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked

after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ 37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ 40 “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ 41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ 44 “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ 45 “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ 46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.) That passage is why we feed the hungry, why we visit the sick, why we visit those in prison, why we provide clothing and do other acts of ministry. Jesus calls us to offer that protection to the many who need it because love – real love – is not one that focuses only on self. The love of God – the agape love of which the Scriptures speak – is a love that thinks beyond self, it is not concerned only with self; it is, rather, self-sacrificing. As Paul says of love in Philippians 2:4, love leads us to the point that we are *not looking after your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.*

### *Love Always Trusts*

My phone rings off the hook many days with scam calls (well, it doesn’t actually have a hook, as it is a cell phone). I received a call on Friday that I was going to be arrested if I didn’t pay the IRS a certain amount of money. I transcribed the message and honestly, it’s a bit hard to trust a message like this – *It’s matter is very serious emergency and time sensitive we are calling you from investigation team of IRS. We have just received notification regarding your tax filings from the headquarters and she will get expired in the next 24 working the cars and want to get expired after that custody by the local cops at her or serious allegations pressed on your name at the moment. We can. Read. You know 5. I. Should 6 not. Thank you.* Well, at least they were polite enough to thank me. Here’s a general rule for me – I don’t trust any threatening message that does not contain at least two coherent sentences. If you are going to scam me, at least put together a minimum of two coherent sentences!

It’s hard to trust, because experience sometimes teaches us to not to be trusting. Some years ago, in a community where I was serving, I was asked to be the judge at a baby contest at a community event. Even in my youthful inexperience I knew that was a bad idea. I had heard enough people complain about the judging in baby contests to know that I should absolutely not accept such an assignment. The person in charge, however, promised me that I would remain anonymous, and against my better judgment, I accepted. I walked carefully around the babies, trying my best to not look like a judge, and wrote down my selections for first, second, and third place. I turned in my results and stood off to the side, feeling safe in my anonymity. Just before the winners were announced, the MC turned, pointed to me, and said to the crowd gathered, *before we announce our winners I want to thank our judge for the baby contest – Dave Charlton! Thank you Dave!* I’m not sure of the response of the crowd, as I was running for the hills at that point. Suffice it to say, I would never again trust anyone who promised me anonymity in exchange for judging a baby context!

Here at church we receive a lot of requests for assistance, and we are very careful to do our due diligence, because there are people who try and scam churches and we want to be as careful as possible with the resources you entrust to us. You work hard for your money, and we do not want it to be lost to one of the scams that come our way. It bothers me to have to have a level of suspicion about requests for assistance, but if we do not, we will sometimes get scammed.

Some things are obviously scams, but others aren't, and the difficulty is that we become less trusting and more suspicious about everything in general. It used to be that we lived by the maxim that *if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is*. Now it seems we live by a new maxim – *don't believe anything to be true*. To be honest, I think the suspicious natures we have developed are partly necessary to help us navigate a world where there are many who seek to take advantage of us. Jesus does say, don't forget, that we should *shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves* (Matthew 10:16). At the same time, however, those suspicions and that mistrust tears at our social fabric as we become less willing to trust almost everything and everyone.

Is there any trust left these days? Is there any trust left in our institutions? How much trust is left in government? How much trust is left in churches? The financial scandals, the leadership scandals, and the abuse scandals in churches have destroyed so much of the trust that once was a given. It is a sacred trust to receive people into our care. It is a sacred trust to deal with children and young people. It is a sacred trust to be given money for ministry. What can be done to win back trust? Well, love has a very large element of trust, and that is why that leap into love can be very difficult, because trust can be very difficult, but love cannot truly exist without trust.

### *Love Always Hopes*

What gives you hope? Do you ever feel hopeless about the state of the world? What about young people today? I think many of them feel rather hopeless about their future. My generation and those that came before were, for the most part, very optimistic about the future. We believed we were going to change the world! We believed anything was possible! The generations behind us, however, are far less hopeful. If you have millennials in your family, you will find that they believe we have left them a world with an environment that is collapsing. They believe they have fewer economic opportunities. They believe their future is not as bright. It is hard to see their sense of hopelessness, but it is a powerful force among that generation.

Things did not seem very hopeful in Paul's day. This is, let us not forget, someone who was martyred for his faith. Yes, it is difficult today, but I think Paul might remind us that it was no cakewalk in his day either. Paul writes a good deal about *hope*. In Romans 8:28 he reminds us of this – *we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*. Even though he does not use the word *hope*, those words exude a sense of it. In the beautiful letter to the Philippians he writes in 3:13-14, *brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called my heavenward in Christ Jesus*. Once again, Paul does not use the word *hope*, but it takes *hope* to keep pressing on. It takes *hope* to continue reaching for the prize. It is *hope* that fuels us, it is *hope* that empowers us, it is *hope* that allows us to put one foot in front of the other on our most difficult of days, it is *hope* that reminds us that when we are overwhelmed with grief that there will one day be resurrection and reunion, it is *hope* that provides us with a reason to awake each day, to rise up and to have faith that we can overcome whatever comes our way. Isaiah 40:31 is one of my absolute favorite verses, and it says *those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint*. Isn't that a great promise, that we will have a renewal of strength? Who doesn't need more strength? Who doesn't feel tired and weary, worn down by life's challenges? Who doesn't want to soar above all of the difficulties of life, and who doesn't want to rise above all of the challenges and difficulties that come our way? Wouldn't it be great to soar above all of life's challenges?

Henri Nouwen said that *hope is to keep living amid desperation. Hope is knowing that there is love; it is trusting in tomorrow*.

## *Loves Always Perseveres*

One of the things that makes church unique among all organizations is that we are 99% volunteer driven. That's amazing! After hours of work and days of work, volunteers offer even more hours in the ministry of our church. After hours and days of meeting deadlines and demands at work, volunteers offer more time to our church. I know that is tiring. I know that brings weariness. I know that makes you sometimes feel like quitting. How often do you feel like quitting? How often do you feel like giving up? Over my years of ministry, on a number of Sunday evenings, evenings when I was feeling very discouraged about things, I would write letters of resignation and then file them away. Over the years I had amassed a lot of those letters. I never showed them to anyone, and I never intended to turn them in, but it helped me to write them. I no longer write those letters but there are occasions when I compose one in my mind. It is in those moments that I turn to Paul for encouragement. Paul knew a lot about perseverance. Paul spent a lot of his time encouraging others to continue, to not give up. In II Corinthians 4:17-18 he writes that *our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

Peter knew quite a bit about perseverance as well. In his first letter, 1:6-7 he writes *in all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

I want to close by sharing an illustration I heard recently, one that ties things together very well (thanks to Leigh Bond, of Beargrass Christian Church in Louisville, from whom I adapted this illustration). I never took chemistry class. After passing biology by a single point it didn't seem like a good idea for me to try my hand at chemistry. But I did receive a good chemistry/theology lesson recently, and it is about two elements, the first of which is sodium. Sodium, by itself, is an unstable element, so when it is found naturally it is always in a combined form, bound to another element. The second element is chloride, which is poisonous, so you do not want to ingest chloride in any form. Most, if you not all of you, however, will do so in just a little while. When you go to lunch, you will ingest chloride, although it will be combined with sodium, forming sodium chloride. Do you know what sodium chloride is? It's salt. It's fascinating that two elements, when they are by themselves, are very different than when they are combined. One, by itself, is unstable and the other, by itself, is poisonous. Together, however, they become life-sustaining. In a similar way, God links us together, as we are much more stable when linked to others. This is actually the meaning of the word religion. Religion means *to bind together*. You see, when we are bound together with others, our lives are much richer. When we are bound together with others, we are less likely to fall victim to the poisonous actions of hatred and vitriol. I can't tell you the chemical term for the linking of two elements I can tell you the theological term – love. When the love of God bonds with us what does it do? It helps us to persevere. It gives us hope. It helps us trust. And it gives us protection and calls us to the protection of others. And not just sometimes, but always. Always!