

Reading the Instructions Before Taking the Test

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



1 Corinthians 13:1-13

There was a test that my fourth grade teacher gave our class that I will never forget. I suspect it is a test that a lot of us have taken at some point along the way. It wasn't that hard a test and we wondered why she was giving it to us. It had some math and some spelling and some vocabulary. And I was feeling quite good about myself because the answers were coming to me fairly easily. It looked like I was getting along a lot faster than most – which was always a priority for me when I was a kid. When I finished the last question I had a great sense of pride as I turned to the last page ... and the last page had one last instruction. Now there was some instruction at the beginning of the test ... which said something like, "Read through the entire test before answering any of the questions." I didn't want to take the time to do that, of course, so I had just ploughed into the test. The last instruction, though, at the end of the test said this, "Return to the beginning and answer only the first question of the test." I looked up at Miss Kennedy who had this big smirk on her face and I knew I was cooked. I flipped my pencil over to begin erasing my answers to questions 2 and following ... and she just shook her head. I was cooked. The whole class was cooked. We had taken the test before reading all the instructions. We had taken the test without even following the first instruction.

Last week I mentioned that I grew up in the age of the Beatles. I also grew up in the age of Vince Lombardi – the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers. I wasn't a Packers fan myself (I was a lowly Lion's fan) but playing sports all the way through high school you could not escape references to Vince Lombardi and his quotations – and in particular the quote – "Winning isn't everything – it's the only thing." I can still remember it being shouted in the locker rooms of my youth. Actually Lombardi borrowed it from another coach, UCLA coach Red Sanders – and just about everybody else borrowed it from Vince Lombardi.

Winning isn't everything – it's the only thing. The modern creed of sports supplanting unfortunately what were once timeless creeds: "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game." Or the Olympic creed: "The most important thing is not winning, but taking part." Lombardi and thousands of coaches since him would say – don't bother taking the test until you understand the first instruction – Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing.

Last week we talked for a bit about the apostle Paul and his letter to the Corinthians. Paul was the apostle who helped to form the community which stood at one of the great intersections of the Roman Empire. It was a cosmopolitan city and the church was this little house church, or perhaps houses of churches, that gathered on a regular basis to live out the life of community. They had received the Spirit. They were doing great things. They were answering a lot of the questions on the test. But there was one problem. They were breaking apart. People were beginning to believe that their handle on the Spirit – their individual handle on the Spirit

... was a little bit better than other people's handle on the Spirit. Their gifts of the Spirit – were perhaps a little bit elevated above other people's gifts of the Spirit. And they started forming in groups and they attached themselves to particular leaders and teachers ... and they said, "Our leader and teacher is better than your leader and teacher. We have the Spirit more than you have the Spirit." And all of sudden there were Peter's people, and there were Paul's

gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I am bankrupt without love."

You can take the whole test, Paul says, and get all the answers right ... but if you haven't followed the first instruction and the last instruction – you have failed. And what you have failed at is seeing the essence of the universe. The essence of the cosmos. The essence of existence. The very thing that holds the whole thing together.

“...I have this God who is holding onto me even when I give him every reason to let go. And I'll hold onto you whatever it takes.”

people, and there were Apollos' people. And everyone thought they were getting the answers right on the test.

And that is the preamble to perhaps the most quoted verses written by the apostle Paul – the great love chapter.

Eugene Peterson translates it wonderfully:

"If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but don't have love, I am nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've

Because you see when Paul writes all that he writes about the gospel he does so out of being overwhelmed by the love of God. Paul looks at Jesus and tells us not much about what Jesus taught, not much about the miracles Jesus performed, but all of what God has done in Jesus in his coming, in his dying and his being raised. And what God has done in Jesus is that God has grabbed hold of us and promised to never let go. To never let go. Nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And for Paul this is the essence not just of the good news, it is the essence of existence. The universe is held together by the love of God that will not let the universe and all that is in it, go.

Every page of the New Testament echoes this basic truth – Beloved let us love one another, for love is of God. And he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love, does not know God for God is... love. O love that wilt not let me go.

Did you hear that – God has grabbed hold of you – whether you like it or not, whether you know it or not – and will not let you go?

And so the first instruction and last instruction, according to Paul, is to point us to the fact that it doesn't matter what you know, it doesn't matter how much you have, it doesn't matter what awards you get – the only thing that matters is whether you gave yourself the chance to join into not just one of the rhythms of the cosmos, but the only rhythm of the cosmos. That in this very moment God his holding on to the universe – and he would love for you to help in the holding.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Did you hear that? Love never ends. Love never lets go.

So we have this incredible news. God has a hold of us and is never letting go. No exceptions. No small print. No quid pro quo. No bell curve. And so what Paul in the name of Christ invites us into is the same kind of love – no exceptions, no small print. No quid pro quo. And that is the struggle and adventure of the Christian life. Exceptionless love. Love that says I will hold on to you even if you don't hold onto me. I will hold onto you even

if you don't agree with me. I will hold onto you even if you don't return my love. I will hold onto you even if you drive me crazy. Because, you see, I have this God who is holding onto me even when I give him every reason to let go. And I'll hold onto you whatever it takes.

An old story that comes from India tells of a man who was sitting under an old ancient tree whose giant roots meandered down into a swamp. While he sat there he heard a noise where one of the roots entered into the water. He looked closely and could see that a scorpion had become helplessly entangled in the roots. He got up from where he was sitting and balanced himself along the root down to where the scorpion was trapped. He reached down to try to pull it free. But each time he reached down to grab hold of the scorpion the scorpion would lash him with its tail, stinging him painfully. But he kept trying. And each time he would get lashed with the tail. Finally his hand had swelled so greatly he could not close his fingers. So he withdrew to the shade of the tree to wait for the swelling to go down. As he arrived at the base of the tree he saw a young man up on the road laughing at him. "You foolish old man," said the young man, "wasting your time trying to help a scorpion that can only do you harm." The old man replied, "Simply because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting, should I change my nature, which is to save?"

In this is love, says the writer of I John, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his son to get stung, to be sacrificed. To take upon himself the sins of the world. "Beloved," he continues, "if God so loved us we also ought to love one another."

If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

And so of course the last thing he thought to do on his way to the cross was to put out a spread and give us the signs of the universal rhythm. Bread broken. Body broken for you. Cup poured. Blood poured for you. It's what God does. It's what we can do to.

God is going to love us anyway – one way or the other. And why not enjoy it now!

Kathleen Norris tells the story of a Benedictine sister who is keeping vigil at the bedside of her dying mother. She seeks to comfort her mother by saying, "Mom, in heaven everyone we love is there." But her mother, wiser in the Spirit, tells her differently: "No, my child," she says, "in heaven everyone who is there finally I will love."

We love because God first loved us. The first and the last instruction. All else is just a creaky, rusty gate.



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Church of the Palms

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