

## ***The Greatness of Love (Part 1)***

### *1 Corinthians 13*

Two weeks from today we will be doing another 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting. We're going to take 3 weeks to seek God in a very focused and disciplined way. If you would like to participate in this 21 Days experience, you will be able to register beginning this Tuesday; the eBlast will include a registration link. You'll hear more details soon, but we're going to be talking about our calling as a church to be disciples who love God, love each other, and love our neighbors.

In preparation for our 21 Days we are going to take two weeks to study 1 Corinthians 13, the famous "love chapter."

READ 1 Corinthians 13:1–13.

The church at Corinth was unhealthy in many ways. The church was full of factions and rivalries. Their disunity was on full display when they celebrated the Lord's Table (11:23-33) and in the way they used their spiritual gifts. [Spiritual gifts are specific abilities that the Spirit gives to each believer to use for the common good.] For example, some of them believed that if you had one of a few select gifts (such as miracles, gifts of healings, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues - see 12:29-30), you were basically superior to others in the church.

In 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul writes to correct their misunderstandings and misuse of spiritual gifts. His main argument in chapter 12 is that the Church is like a human body. The human body has many different members with different functions. But they're all essential. Nobody wants to be "all thumbs," for example. In the same way the body of Christ is comprised of many different people with different spiritual gifts and therefore different functions. But every member of the body of Christ is essential.

At the end of chapter 12 Paul writes this to church people who believed that their specific gifting made them superior to other believers (in verse 31):

31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

Paul will argue that the "greater gifts" are those that are exercised in love and therefore build up other believers (e.g., prophecy - see 14:1). And the more excellent way is the way of love, the topic of chapter 13.

In chapter 13 Paul tells us three foundational truths about love: consequences of lovelessness, the nature of love, and the greatness of love. We'll look at the first and third truths today and the second truth next week.

***The Consequences of Lovelessness.*** (1 Corinthians 13:1-3) I was talking with a friend about this passage this week, and his comment was, "these verses should make you squirm." I agree: if they don't make you squirm and if they don't stop you in your tracks you aren't hearing what Paul is saying.

1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

The chapters before and after 1 Corinthians 13 address the topic of speaking in tongues. In chapter 14 Paul writes that when he speaks in tongues, his spirit is praying to God (who is Spirit); so it's spirit-to-Spirit communication that bypasses the mind. Paul teaches that while tongues are a God-given gift (see 12:11 - various kinds of tongues) and beneficial to the person with that gift, tongues should not be viewed as a litmus test for spirituality. The phrase "the tongues of angels" reflects the belief that some kinds of tongues were actually languages that angels speak (just as the tongues in Acts 2 were actually languages that other peoples spoke).

Here Paul writes that if he had those gifts and yet didn't have love, he has become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. In other words, without love, he would be one more loud, shrill noise in people's ears. Lovelessness nullifies ***influence***.

2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

I think Paul is still talking about specific spiritual gifts in this verse because in chapter 12:8-10 Paul listed three of the four things mentioned (prophecy, knowledge, and faith) as spiritual gifts. We won't take the time to discuss them in detail today; I'll just make a couple of relevant observations.

First, these are gifts that deal with truth: knowing what is true, speaking what is true, and believing what is true. Much of 1 Corinthians deals with the importance of understanding and believing what is true. These gifts are foundational.

Second, Paul repeatedly praises these gifts as ***God-given*** and ***valuable***. In chapter 14, for example, Paul tells the Corinthians to "earnestly desire" the gift of prophecy over tongues (especially in public worship) because it is intelligible speech that builds up the body. These gifts are profitable.

But, Paul says, if I have these gifts but don't have love, "I am nothing" - not in an absolute sense, but in relation to his value in the kingdom. He would have no influence in the lives of others and no usefulness to God. Lovelessness nullifies ***knowledge***. See 1 Corinthians 8:1, "Knowledge puffs up but love builds up."

Maybe it's always been this way, but it seems like in 21st century America we are obsessed with knowledge and information and being right. Generally speaking our culture says that you are 100% justified in shaming and trashing others if we think they are wrong. This has long been true when it comes to politics and social issues. Sadly, this is increasingly true in the church when we talk about theological and spiritual issues. Paul says that you can go down that road, but ***if you don't speak the truth in love***, you are ***nothing*** in the kingdom.

We each need to personalize this as Paul did (first person singular - "If *I* have the gift of prophecy. . ."). If I personalize it, I would say, "I can preach a thousand sermons and get every single point exactly right, but without love my entire ministry was wasted." Spend some time this week thinking through the implications of lovelessness nullifying any knowledge you possess.

In verse 3 Paul says that it is possible for a person to make the most extreme sacrifices imaginable without any spiritual or eternal benefit. Again, the thing that disqualifies our sacrifices is lovelessness.

3 And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

The phrase, "give all my possessions to feed the poor" reminds us of the "rich young ruler" in Luke 18. This man came to Jesus inquiring about what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said, "You know the commandments. . . don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, etc." The man said, "I've kept these commands since I was a boy." Jesus' reply was, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." Treasures on earth have one type of benefit, but "treasures in heaven"?!?!

Here in verse 3 Paul says that it's possible to do exactly what Jesus told the rich young ruler to do and yet do it "without love." This is one of the things that should stop us in our tracks. Sacrifice does NOT equal love. When you sacrifice without love, "it profits you nothing." There's no spiritual or eternal benefit. That's the worst of both worlds - this one and the next.

When he mentions, "if I surrender my body to be burned," he's talking about being willing to die for some cause in the most excruciating way. Again, Paul says that it's possible to make such a sacrifice and yet not "have love." When that's the case, there is no spiritual or eternal benefit.

Let this reality trouble you: Lovelessness nullifies out giftedness, our knowledge, and any sacrifices we might make. Without love our lives are devoid of spiritual benefit to ourselves or to anybody else.

Why is it that lovelessness is so devastating spiritually? What is it about love that makes it so essential? We could go to a number of Scriptures, but I think 1 John 4 gets at the core reason.

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

In essence, God is love. Therefore, if you are born of God (if you're God's child), you bear the family resemblance; you also love other people. Without love we're not showing off God's glory; we're just showing off. And we're therefore useless to God.

I would encourage you to take time to be troubled by your lack of love. Let the Spirit of God convict you of your lack of love. But don't stop there. Be challenged and strengthened by the gospel. John 1:12, for example, says that "as many as received Him [Jesus] to them He gave the right to become children of God." If you have received Jesus by faith, you are "born of God" and now have the capacity to love. Romans 5:5 tells us that "the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit that was given to us." The gospel assures us that we can and should be people who love. That's what we're hoping to internalize during our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting - how God provides everything we need to love Him, love each other, and love our neighbors.

Back to 1 Corinthians 13. . . When we read verses 1-3 we should think, "If lovelessness nullifies any my influence, my giftedness, and any sacrifices I make. . . and leaves me without any spiritual or eternal benefit, I **have** to know what love is and isn't. I don't want to go through life thinking I'm a loving person when I'm really not." Paul helps us out in verses 4 through 7.

***The Nature of Love.*** (1 Corinthians 13:4-7) Next Sunday morning we'll talk about these verses in some detail. I'll simply read them today.

4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Next week we'll look at these 15 short statements and talk about how they should inform the way we think, speak, and act. Since "God is love," we'll talk about how He treats us the way Paul tells us to treat others. But in our time remaining let's consider:

***The Greatness of Love.*** (1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

In verse 8 Paul loops back to three of the gifts he mentions in verses 1 and 2.

8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.

"Love never fails" can be translated "love never ends" (so ESV). In time and in eternity love will never be obsolete or inappropriate. Love will always meet the need of the moment. By contrast, the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will one day cease (be done away) because they will be obsolete. Paul tells us why in verses 9 and 10:

9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part;

In this life, any knowledge we have and any prophesy given is “partial” in the sense of being incomplete. This doesn’t mean that these gifts are worthless, only that they’re not perfect.

10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

When the perfect comes (at the return of Christ), partial/imperfect gifts will be no more. Spiritual gifts have an expiration date. They will be unnecessary when we dwell directly in the presence of God.

In verses 11 Paul gives a personal example of something becoming obsolete, namely the way he spoke and thought and reasoned during his childhood.

11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

The child I know the best is my three-year-old grandson Wyatt. He speaks as a child. He doesn’t really know how to use pronouns yet, only nouns. “Wyatt doesn’t want Grandpa to play with that.” Hopefully when Wyatt becomes a man he won’t talk or think or reason like he does today. Just as we all (hopefully) “do away with childish things,” one day certain gifts will fade into the past.

In verse 12 Paul gives an illustration to emphasize the superiority of our knowledge and experience of God when “the perfect comes” and “the partial is done away.”

12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

Today’s mirrors give a very clear image, but that wasn’t the case in the first century. Since mirrors were made of polished brass or some other metal, they gave an imperfect, dim reflection. Our current knowledge of God is like that even though we have the Scriptures and spiritual gifts that help us understand the Scriptures and the indwelling Holy Spirit who illumines the Scriptures. But when Jesus returns, our knowledge won’t be a dim reflection because we’ll see Him face-to-face. We will “know fully” just as we also “have been fully known” by God.

13 But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

There are two ways of understanding this verse. I’ve always taken it to mean that **now** - in this world - faith, hope, and love abide/remain. But since love is the greatest virtue, faith will become sight and no longer be needed; hope will be realize and therefore pass away; but love will remain. But I’ve become more inclined to the second understanding that takes “now” not as meaning “now vs. the future” (the meaning in verse 12 - a different word for “now”), but “now” as in “now this is what I’m saying in summery.” What he’s saying is that “faith, hope, and love” all three abide/remain even when the perfect comes; we will still trust in God and set our hope on Him (not ourselves). But throughout eternity, “the greatest of these is love.”

The greatness of love and the consequences of lovelessness should cause us to cry out: “God, open my eyes to the true nature of love. And teach me to love others as you have loved me.” That’s what we’ll discuss next Sunday.