

Love Is the Way

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Have you heard the story about the actor who was playing the part of Christ in the Passion Play in the Ozarks? As he carried the cross up the hill a tourist began heckling, making fun of him, and shouting insults at him. Finally, the actor had taken all of it he could take. So he threw down his cross, walked over to the tourist, and punched him out.

After the play was over, the director told him, "I know he was a pest, but I can't condone what you did. Besides, you're playing the part of Jesus, and Jesus never retaliated. So don't do anything like that again." **Well, the man promised he wouldn't. But the next day the heckler was back worse than before, and finally the actor exploded and punched him out again.**

The director said, "That's it. I have to fire you. We just can't have you behaving this way while playing the part of Jesus." The actor begged, "Please give me one more chance. I really need this job, and I can handle it if it happens again." **So the director decided to give him another chance.**

The next day he was carrying his cross up the street. Sure enough, the heckler was there again. You could tell that the actor was really trying to control himself, but it was about to get the best of him. **He was clinching his fists and grinding his teeth.** Finally, he looked at the heckler and said, "I'll meet you after the resurrection!"

We have already seen that many of the difficulties in the church have been answered by the message of the cross. The conflict with Satan will be renewed from time to time in our lives, but in 1 Corinthians 13 everything is filled with fragrance. It is like waking up to a spring morning full of sunshine and warmth after the coldness and darkness of winter. **I trust will not hurry in your personal study of this chapter, but it to become a refreshing blessing to your heart.**

Three chapters here have to do with spiritual gifts: chapter 12 tells of God's rich endowment of gifts to His people; chapter 13 tells of God's energy imparted to our lives, which makes it possible for us to use the gifts to His glory; chapter 14 gives God's instructions for the exercise of the gifts. Between the endowment of the gifts and the exercise of the gifts there is this great

chapter on love, showing us that the only way to safeguard and rightly use our spiritual gifts is by administering them in the love of God.

When Paul came to this particular point in dictating this letter, I somehow feel his face lit up with glory. Surely the first twelve chapters must have caused him pain as he wrote to this church concerning their low spiritual state. As he himself said in chapter 1:7, they "came behind in no gift," but they were tragically lacking in this quality of love! I think it must have been a precious release for him to put in this wonderful chapter. The love of God is the answer to all the problems, not only in Corinth, but in all of our churches today.

It is significant that it was Paul the theologian who has given us this great passage, and not John, the disciple of love. Those two men differed widely in their gifts and ministry, but they were united in this one thing, the greatest any Christian can possess, the grace of love. In fact, Paul tells us quite plainly that if we have no love we have nothing; but if we have love, though we may lack much else, then we have what matters most.

It is obvious that Paul is speaking here about a love that is beyond the reach of our human "self." He is simply giving us a standard that can be obtained only through the power of Jesus Christ living His life through us.

Therefore, every description of love in this chapter is applicable to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus suffers long, and is kind. Jesus envies not; Jesus vaunts not Himself, is not puffed up, does not behave Himself unseemly. Jesus seeks not His own, is not easily provoked, take no account of evil, rejoices not in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Jesus never fails.

The Bible teaches us that love is the one thing that is completely indestructible; while other things pass away, love lasts. It is *not* dependent on anything outside of itself; it is *not* affected by the worthiness or unworthiness of the one it loves. When we become New Testament Christians, that quality of love is born in us when we are born again.

And if that divinely gifted love really grips your heart, your Christian experience will be utterly revolutionized because the very first place it will show up in your life is in your attitude!

As we study 1 Corinthians 13, we will look at it from three different angles. In the first place, in verses 1-3, there is what I am calling the

preeminence of love, that is, its *value*; in verses 4-7 there is the *prerogative* of love, that is, its *virtue*. And in the closing part of the chapter, in verses 8-13, there is the *permanence* of love, that is, its *victory*. **In the first three verses we see a life without love, and in the following verses, love as the strength of a man's life and character. In the closing part of the chapter we see a life with love as its goal and ambition.**

We find, first, the picture of an individual who is blessed with gifts and talents to an amazing degree, and yet without love his life is empty and worthless. Here the searchlight of heaven is turned on the man or woman who has strong powers of emotion, tremendous powers of intellect, and the most amazing powers of will, but because he/she is lacking in love they are nothing. Notice the three-fold repetition of the phrase, "but have not love."

The first principle is that love must be sovereign in the heart. Look at verse 1, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." **Sometimes we miss what Paul is saying right here.**

Back in the 1st Century, there was a big gong or cymbal hanging at the entrance of most pagan temples. When people came to worship, they hit them to awaken the pagan gods so they would listen to their prayers.

Paul has been talking about the gift of tongues, the highest expression of emotion, praise and worship. Here he supposes himself to be in possession of this gift to such a degree that he speaks not only with the tongues of men, but with the tongues of angels, as well. Even if he can do this, and has no love, then his life is as useless as this ridiculous act of pounding on a gong to awaken nonexistent gods.

The power behind your tongue, your speech, is not determined by the extent of your vocabulary but by the depth of your heart, by how much you love. What use is eloquence without love? The tongue possesses power to do devastating damage. Its hiss can be as full of venom and spite as a poisonous serpent. **It is often the last thing that God gets control of in the Christian's life.** I am convinced that when we actually allow Christ to love through us, we really do not need eloquent words as a medium of expression, for love is universal in every language.

I have heard preachers whose messages have left me breathless and made me go away saying, "Man what a message." **Great words may command**

admiration, but only love can reach the heart. That is why in Matthew 22, Jesus said the most important commandment of all is to "...love the lord thy God with all thy heart...and thy neighbor as thyself."

The second principle is that love must be sovereign in our intellect. Look at verse 2, "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing."

There are four things here that belong to our intellect as distinct from our emotions or our will. The first is prophecy. Prophecy is the power to declare the things of God, the power to interpret life, the power to bring the word of heaven to bear upon earth, the power to bring eternity into time. **The second is mysteries.** I take that to mean the discernment of spiritual things, understanding God's secrets. **The third is knowledge.** Knowledge here is intelligence in the truth, an understanding of Scripture. **The last is faith.** The word for faith here means that firmness of belief which will take a man through the difficulties and problems and testings, because he trusts the promises of God.

Paul says that you may possess all these wonderful gifts and abilities, but without love you are nothing. There are men in the Bible who illustrate this truth. For instance, *Balaam* was a prophet, but he had no love, and therefore he betrayed his prophetic office. *Caiaphas*, the High Priest, had discernment, for he knew that one must be slain for the nation, but he was without love, and he became a leader among those who crucified the Lord of glory. *Judas Iscariot* had knowledge, all that he could acquire at the Master's feet in three years, but he had no love, and he betrayed the Lord.

Prophecy, mystery, knowledge, and faith - all of these are gifts and abilities. But love is not a *gift*. Love is a *grace*, and it is the primary proof of a genuine new birth experience. In fact, Galatians 5:22 lists love as the first fruit of the Spirit. The first thing that happens to a man when he is born again is the melting of his heart in love.

Apart from this divine love, the gifts of the Spirit may be exercised in selfishness. A man with faith but no love can become filled with anger and bitterness and cause division in the Body of Christ. A man with a faith that can move mountains right out of his path, if he has no love, will throw them right into the path of somebody else. People with many gifts and much power may become celebrated theologians, renowned missionaries, great authors or scholars or teachers of the Word. But if something less than the love of God in

Jesus Christ is the moving force in their lives, then the Bible says they are nothing.

There is one other thing here: love must be *sovereign* in a man's will. Look at verse 3, "If I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing."

Love is to dominate not only my emotions and my intellect, but my will. There are the three principle faculties of a human being, and they must be kept in harmony. If you are going to be sane and well balanced under the pressure of days like these, the love of God must be in control to keep our *intellect*, our *emotions*, and our *will* in balance.

Paul takes two examples here. If a man distributes everything he has to feed the poor, or even if he goes to the limit of absolute sacrifice, and has no love, it is all worthless.

You might be thinking, "No one would ever do those things unless he loved." **What about the heathen beating himself in chains, or cutting himself to death to make peace with his god? That is not love, but fear!** What about those people who give their time and money to help feed the poor because they are looking for a reward in the hereafter. **These are people making sacrifices for the wrong motives.**

Having seen what Paul has had to say, I am convinced there are Christians caught up in this kind of thinking. For example, what about those Christian who are willing to march and protest against abortions, yet they carry anger and resentment against those doctors who do the abortions? What about those people who are so militant about the "same sex marriage" controversy, yet they hate those in bondage to a homosexual lifestyle? **What about those people who are so willing to defend the King James Version of the Bible, and yet they exclude those from their fellowship that might use another translation? Paul is simply saying that if we are not careful, we will get so caught up in a cause that we will forget the principle of living in the spirit of love.** Paul is saying, "It is pointless to die for a wrong motive."

Listen to the response of Jesus to the church at Ephesus, in Revelation 2:2-4, "I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear evil men...and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." **What a solemn,**

terrifying picture of busyness, patience, discernment, toil, endurance, but absolutely without the one thing that matters - love!

Notice, finally, the five "ifs" in these verses. You will find it "though" in the King James Version, but the meaning is "if." "If I speak with the tongues of men...if I have the gift of prophecy...if I have all faith...if I bestow all my goods...if I give my body to be burned..." Notice, also, the four "alls." "and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge...and if I have all faith...if I bestow all my goods..."

If such an individual ever lived on the face of this earth who did all that, I tell you, without love, he is nothing. Why? Because God is love, and without love, he is without God!

You may have all these gifts and do all these things, but without the Lord Jesus in your life, what is the use? You are not something or somebody, but you are absolutely nobody, worthless for time and eternity! What is the one thing that is going last when you pass from this earthly scene and meet God face to face? **Your gifts, your abilities, your knowledge, your sacrifice, your faith?** All of these things are great and wonderful, but the one thing that Jesus says will stand the test of time can be summed up in these simple words – “love God and love people!” **Does that describe your life?**

If you are not saved, why not tonight?