

“WITHOUT LOVE I AM NOTHING”: THE IMPORTANCE OF LOVE

Beloved in Christ our Lord,

There is nothing greater in this world than love. There is nothing that we need more in our Christian lives than love.

We need the love of our friends and our family.

We need the love of the church

And above all, We need the love of God.

But our need for love is not only the need to RECEIVE love. But rather, the love that we have received MUST prompt us also to love.

Our text this morning, 1 Corinthians 13 is, perhaps, the most well-known passage on love in the entire Bible. It is common for even unbelievers to have a portion of this chapter read at weddings.

But the sad reality is, that even when reading this love letter like no other, the world does not know a lot about love. The world does not truly understand love.

And our knowledge of love in the church also tends to be lacking. We extol virtues such as faith. We must have faith for this present time. We talk quite a bit about hope. Hope for the future. Hope in God...a hope that does not disappoint.

We put a great priority on having good and solid doctrine. Love without truth is a dangerous thing! we think and we say.

And this is true. True faith is essential to the Christian life. A life without hope is a life lived not knowing God. Having good and solid doctrine is vital. Each one of these things are true.

But love.

But love is the supreme good. Love is what binds everything together. Love is the blood in the veins of the Christian. The life-force that runs through our whole bodies.

Without love...

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- More useful than tongues
- More powerful than faith
- More valuable than life itself

First point: Love is more useful than tongues

The Apostle Paul’s grand teaching on love comes in a very specific context. Although our text is primarily found in 1 Corinthians 13, we have to turn back 10 chapters to get a good look at what is going on.

1 Corinthians 3. In 1 Corinthians 3, we find some of the harshest words for Christians in all of scripture.

V1

“But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.”

The contrast of flesh vs spirit is a common one for the Apostle Paul. The Spirit is life, but the flesh is death. And the Corinthians had gone so far astray from being the church, they had acted in exactly the opposite way of their calling. And so the Apostle had to address them as people of the flesh.

“But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.

And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For where there is jealous and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?”

These were devastating words! Corinth, the church that was so blessed by God. The church that was bursting at the seams with spiritual gifts...they were worldly. They were fleshly.

This is the issue among the Corinthians. They had lost their way, and Paul was writing to correct this deluded and struggling congregation.

So what exactly was their problem? How were they living according to the flesh?

They were prideful. They were jealous. They had split into various groups in the church.

I follow Paul!

I follow Apollos!

I follow Cephas!

You see, the biggest issue in Corinth was not doctrine. Even though Paul has to correct their doctrine, time and again in this letter, doctrine isn't the heart of the issue.

The issue in Corinth, the issue in this world, and I dare say the issue in every single church of Jesus Christ, is a lack of love. There is a lack of love because there is sin.

Corinth was not immune.

We here in this congregation are not immune.

Not one of us loves the way that we are supposed to, myself included.

For the Corinthians, they were distracted by the outward symbols of their new status in Christ. They were a church where the Holy Spirit was working powerfully.

The Corinthians spoke in tongues. They were given the utterance of wisdom and knowledge. They had the gift of faith, they could heal with the touch of their hands, they could do miracles, distinguish between spirits.

But is this what sets a church off as true or faithful? No! Paul said that they were living according to the flesh!

For, despite their miraculous gifts, their motivations were corrupt! They were fighting with each other.

Competing. Quarreling. Pushing and shoving to display their gifts so that others would admire and respect them.

And so Paul is like saying to them: **You don't understand who you are! You don't understand what the Church is. You don't understand the purpose of Christ working among you by His Spirit.**

The mark of belonging to Jesus Christ is not speaking in tongues. It isn't miraculous healings. But instead, it is love.

This is what Jesus said in one of His last teaching opportunities on earth.

“On the night He was betrayed, Jesus taught His disciples: A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

It is all about love.

That is why Paul introduces 1 Corinthians 13, the climax of his letter with the phrase: And I will show you a still more excellent way.

A way more excellent than speaking in tongues. A way more excellent than working miracles. The identity of believers, the identity of the church is found in love. It is not, first and foremost, found in our theology.

It is not found in the preaching, whether that preaching is powerful or weak. It is not found in our three forms of unity. It is not found in how well we do the sacraments. It is found in LOVE.

And love is more useful than tongues.

Now...the gift of tongues is a fascinating subject. There are different understandings of what exactly this gift looked like.

There are some who understand the spiritual gift of tongues to be that of miraculously knowing various other human languages. This would be a useful gift in mission work. This seems to be how the gift was introduced in Acts 2. The apostles spoke in tongues on Pentecost. Each person there heard the gospel in their own language.

And then there are those, like modern-day Pentecostals, that believe that the gift of tongues is speaking in an unknown language, speaking the very words of God. Here we see the gift of tongues mixed with the gift of prophecy.

But Paul does not worry about exactly identifying what these tongues look like. Rather he says, If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.

So whatever this gift looked like among the Corinthians, if Paul had the gift of human tongues, to speak in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac, and whatever other languages existed at that time, it would have been amazing! He would have no language barriers in his mission work.

But, all the mission work in the world, without love...would be nothing more than an irritating noise. A gong or a cymbal.

Or if Paul had the gift of angelic tongues. If such tongues exist or whether Paul is simply making a point here, it does not matter. If Paul could speak with the voices of angels, who are constantly singing God's praises in heaven...if he could speak like a mighty supernatural being, but he did not have love...

Then it would just be a louder, fancier cymbal. Without love, speech of any kind is useless and hollow.

Paul then moves on to an even greater kind of speech.

He started with the human languages. Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Syriac etc.

Then he moved on to angelic languages. The languages spoken before the throne of God.

Human languages are less than love.

Angelic languages would be inferior to the gift of love.

And now Paul moves on to prophecy.

If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge

If Paul would be speaking the very words of God. **If he could say “thus says the Lord,” and God’s voice would come out of his mouth...him being a mouthpiece for God without love, he is nothing!**

Are you starting to see the value of love?

–To clarify–

The love that Paul is talking about is far more than how we understand love today.

A warm fuzzy feeling in your heart cannot possibly be greater than the very words of God. Feeling a fondness for a friend is not greater than witnessing to the existence of God.

But love, true love...true love is the most powerful thing in the world.

It is love that caused Jesus Christ to come down from heaven. To forsake the pleasures and glories of being recognized as God the Son in paradise...He came down.

For God SO LOVED the world

It was out of love that the Father was willing to send His Son to suffer and die.

LOVE is the message of the gospel. Love is the most powerful thing in the world.

Love is more powerful than understanding all mysteries and having all knowledge.

Understanding the mystery of how “exactly” God’s sovereignty intersects with human responsibility. Having the knowledge of exactly how our God is triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while also being only one God...these

are amazing things. Having this knowledge could drastically change the way that we think about God.

But Paul, an intellectual, a theologian, a man who longed to know more and more about God... would choose love.

It would be amazing if I could have all knowledge. If I could immediately understand a passage of scripture just by looking at it. If I could defend against any heresy without study. Or, if I had a perfect understanding of Greek and Hebrew, reading the Bible in its original languages without pause or difficulty.

On first glance, these skills seem to far surpass the gift of love. But that is because we don't truly understand the power of love. The power of love surpasses the power, even of faith.

Our second point.

It seems very strange to us that the Apostle Paul, the great man of faith, the man who emphasizes, time and again, the need for faith in the Christian life...that he would say the following: if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

The Apostle Paul, the man of faith...without love, he consider himself nothing

Paul was not strong in love. At least, not historically. When we first see the hand that wrote, "without love I am nothing," it is stained with blood.

He was looking on approvingly as Stephen was stoned.

He went from house to house, grabbing those who were disciples of Jesus Christ. It was this man who wrote these things.

But how should we understand this? How can the power of love surpass the power of faith?

It is through faith that we can do all things! It is faith that connects us to God. It is through faith that we are saved!

Indeed, Jesus said “If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” It is through faith that nothing is impossible for us. So how can love be more powerful yet?

Love is better, love is stronger, because faith is a means to an end. At the end of 1 Corinthians chapter 13, we see three essential qualities of the Christian life compared.

“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

The greatest of these is love. It is because there will be a day when faith is no longer necessary. When faith has done its job, we will see everything face to face. We will see the glories of heaven.

We will hear the voices of angels. We will see the Apostle Paul, his once bloodstained hands reaching out in everlasting praise.

And what is more than that, we will see our God. We will see love personified.

This is why love is greater than faith. Why love is more powerful than faith.

Only love is eternal. Only love is divine.

This is what we learned in our reading from 1 John.

1 John 4:7 → Whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

Love is the mark of a Christian. The Apostle Paul did not doubt that the believers in Corinth were Christians. His concern was that they were not acting in the way that they were supposed to be acting. They were not living in the light of their salvation.

This is why 1 Corinthians 13 is the key to the whole letter. Paul has been pleading with the Corinthians, those who were sanctified and called to be Saints, Paul had been pleading with them to show themselves, to show each other, to show the WORLD who they were.

You have been set free from the dominion of darkness.

You have been set free from what is fleshly in you.

Why are you still flirting with sin?

You need to live a radically different life... because you have been made radically different!

It is by the love of God that they were chosen. It is through FAITH in Jesus Christ that they were transformed. But that transformation was unto love. To make them overflow with the love that they had already received. You see, it is love from first to last.

Back to 1 John.

1 John 4:10-11 → And this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Love is ultimately shown by our God. It was out of His love, His great love with which He loved us, that He sent us our Savior.

It was love that started our relationship with God.

It is faith that makes it possible

It is love that is produced from that relationship.

Love from first to last. Love as the cause and Love as the effect.

Do you see? Do you see how powerful love is?

We tend to go from what we see and feel, and think...God is like this...only better. But, you see, God's love isn't like ours but better. God's love is totally different from the world's love.

The world's love is a feeling → God's love is an action.

The world's love is shown only to friends and family → God loves the least deserving. He loved us when we were His enemies. He loves us still when we trample the love of Christ under foot. When we continue to live in sin.

The world's love is temporary. People love until it gets too hard, and then they try to get over it → God's love has not stopped, and it will not stop.

The Apostle Paul had to make it clear to the Corinthians the type of love he was talking about. This was not the type of love that inflamed a man with lust for his stepmother (1 Corinthians 5). It is not the type of love that simply covers up sin and says: "Whatever man. Whatever you do is fine with me, because I love ya."

This "love" is weak and useless. This love is a disgrace to the word love. The way that the world shows love is not truly love at all. 1 Corinthians 13 reveals to us the only real character of love. It is the most useful. It is the most powerful, and it is the most valuable. More valuable than life itself.

Our third point.

While this comparison made by the Apostle Paul is perhaps the most shocking, we must admit that it flows naturally from the other two.

If love is more useful than all the other spiritual gifts that we can use on this earth, if love is more powerful than faith, the method of eternal salvation, then no matter how you spend your life, no matter how you die...if you do not have love, what has it all been for?

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

If I give away all I have...

What the Apostle is describing here is not one big-time payout. He is not describing someone who empties their bank account one day and donates all their money to charity.

As amazing as that is, as generous and selfless as that is, the Apostle Paul is talking about something else. He is not talking about living a life with no bank account whatsoever. That whenever you get any money, you give it away to those who are even poorer than yourself.

You can think perhaps of Mother Teresa. She lived a life of total poverty on the streets of India. She opened a school for the uneducated, she instituted a home for the dying, she established a leper colony, an orphanage, a nursing home, a family clinic and many mobile health clinics. And Mother Teresa herself? She would walk the streets regularly. Taking in the poor and the sick.

When we hear the story of Mother Teresa, we can't help but be impressed. This was a woman who truly cared.

But, the Apostle Paul says, that even if tomorrow you would go off to India and become the next Mother Teresa...if you do it without love in your heart,

true love, remember, more than just affection...if you do it without love, you have wasted your life! You have gained NOTHING.

We do not know the heart of Mother Teresa. Some say, based on her letters, she was not doing this out of love, but rather as a way to earn her salvation. That she had crisis of faith after crisis of faith. And it is not our position to judge her.

But she is a perfect example of what the Apostle Paul is saying here. If she did all of this work with deep and true love in her heart, the love from God then she will be rewarded beyond imagining in heaven for her selfless love.

But if she did this out of some other motivation, if love did not motivate her...then her life was nothing more than a very public, very tragic waste.

And let me be crystal clear. Do not misunderstand me. It is not our emotions that give our life meaning. Our emotions are fickle. They can change in an instant.

Regularly, our godly emotions trail far behind our faith, and our sinful, worldly emotions run miles ahead. But love is not just an emotion. It is not and it cannot be.

Allow me to jump to Verse 4 → Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Beloved, love is so much more than an emotion. We should not doubt, we should not worry or fear when our emotions are not what we think they are supposed to be. We may not FEEL loving all the time. We may groan inwardly when we think of what we HAVE TO DO for our spouse, our children, our friends.

But, after asking for forgiveness,
for our worldliness, no matter how we feel,
no matter how our old sinful nature protests, we do still do it.

We hold the hand of our wife. We help our son with his math homework.
We go out for coffee with our friend.

We show patience and kindness to everyone who is in our path. We hold
back our anger and irritation. We make a conscious choice to be loving.
And, you know what? The emotions will come. You will be filled with the
emotions that accompany love. It will happen!

Back to verse 3. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be
burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

If you live your entire life for the poor, sacrificing all your worldly
possessions, giving away cars and food and money. Even if you die, in the
service of your neighbor, or in the service of God...if you do not have
love...it is all for nothing!

In a commentary that I consulted for this sermon, I came across the
frightening phrase: Can one go from the flames of martyrdom to the flames
of hell? Without love, this is possible.

You can live, you can die in service of the gospel and still accomplish
nothing! Jesus taught this very truth in Matthew 7

21 → “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of
heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On
that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your
name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in
your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart
from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

The final test at the end of time is not:

How religious were you?

Do you attend both the morning and vesper services?

How much money did you give to the poor?

The final test. At the end of time, when Christ returns on the clouds of heaven will be

How have you loved?

That's it. Full stop. How have you loved?

Beloved, let us not go away from this place, frightened for our salvation. Although we know that we have broken God's law...we know that if we were left to our own actions, we would fail that test at the end of time. But there is more to this story. We are not left alone. Our story is overwhelmed by the story of the gospel.

And this is the gospel message: what we could not do, in our sins and misery, Jesus Christ did for us. Jesus Christ, fully God, and therefore fully LOVE, came into His creation. Because of His love, He lived with sinful wicked people. He was condemned, even though He was innocent. He was put to death on the cross. He truly went through hell, He was forsaken by God.

Satan tried to see just how far our Saviour would go to save us. Just how wide and long and high and deep was the love of Christ.

Though our Savior spoke beautiful words in the tongues of men, though He prayed and worshipped in a way even better than an angel. Though He spoke the very words of God and had faith to move mountains.

Though He lived a life of abject poverty and died for you...it was all made possible, it all MEANT SOMETHING only because of His love.

Satan tried to find the bottom of that love. He tried to find the edge where God says "no more." But he COULDN'T. The love of God is infinite and perfect.

So this week, when you fail to love your wife, your husband, your friends, or even your God...ask for forgiveness. You have done wrong. But know, with absolute certainty, beyond a shadow of a doubt, beyond your fluctuating emotions...that you ARE FORGIVEN. That the love of Jesus Christ has taken away your sins. That the love of Jesus Christ is given to you. Credited to your account as though you loved perfectly.

Do not live as though Jesus never lived.

Do not die as though Jesus never died.

But live your life in the light of who you are in Him. Know that you are loved. Perfectly loved. And know that now, you are to love in return. Share what you have been given. Let everyone see the love of Christ shining through you.

AMEN.