

Text: 1 Cor 13

Title: Love: The Supreme Virtue

Intro: A powerful chapter in the NT—that presents a standard for believers—and nothing short of this standard is acceptable

- The Church at Corinth—was miraculously born, they had amazing gifts, skills, and talents
- What the Corinthians struggled to understand was that all the gifting, all the God-given abilities will amount to nothing in gospel ministry and witness apart from a genuine, heart-felt love for God and others.
- The Corinthian believers claimed to exercise all kinds of gifts, but they were divisive.
 - They spoke in other known languages that they had not learned but tolerated and even endorsed immorality.
 - They claimed wisdom and knowledge but boldly stood against Paul and his gospel message of a crucified and resurrected Messiah.
 - They had the shape and form of Christianity but lacked genuine Christian ethics with its supremacy of love.
 - Their lives were not characterized by love.
- They had not learned love—and they were getting themselves into continual trouble because of it.
- The context is: ‘Love for others is set against self-interest’
- They took the gifts of God and used them for themselves.
- They thought they were ‘better’ than others, and their defining characteristic was selfishness, not love.

John 13:35—Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

- The defining characteristic of a Christian is love.
- It seems easier to be Orthodox than to be loving.
- It’s easier to be active in church work than to be loving.

1 Cor 13—is perhaps the greatest passage ever penned on the subject of love

- This passage is ‘sandwiched’ in between two chapters on spiritual gifts—Why? Because all one’s ability, gifting, and sacrifice is nothing without love.
- This is polemic—the Corinthian Christians were very gifted but using those gifts selfishly—So, everything Paul writes is addressing the abuses in the Corinthian church.
- i.e. ‘Love is patient’—they were being impatient; ‘love is kind’—they were being unkind, etc.
- ‘love’ is the ‘more excellent way’ that Paul mentions in 12:31

One writer: “Self-giving love, love that demands something of us, love that is more concerned with giving than receiving, is as rare in much of the church today as it was in Corinth. The reason, of course, is that *agape* love is so unnatural to human nature. Our world has defined love as “romantic feeling” or “attraction,” which has nothing to do with true love in God’s terms.”¹

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., [*1 Corinthians*](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 329.

The supreme example of love is God's love for sinners as displayed in the cross of Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave..."

- Love is not a feeling but a sacrifice of self for the benefit of others—even for those who hate and do not want to be loved by us.
- JM: "Love is the willing, joyful desire to put the welfare of others above our own."²

Rom 13:8-9—"Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

1 Cor 16:14—says that 'everything a Christian does, should be done in love'

There's no substitute for love. And, there's no excuse for a Christian not to love.

- Col 3:14—"Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity."
- We're to be unified in love (Phil 2:2).
- 1 Peter 4:8—"Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."
- Heb 10:24—"and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,"

Ephesians 4 says that the church is to grow by 'speaking the truth in love'

Prop: The text breaks down into three parts: The necessity of love (1-3), The character of love (4-8), and The permanence of love (9-13).

1. The necessity of love. 13:1-3—Paul gives three strong contrasts: 'how you talk, what you know, and what you are willing to sacrifice'

- Paul begins his exposition of love with super-strong language—hyperbole
- Paul uses three hypothetical situations

The point: 'It really doesn't matter what you say/how you say it, what you believe/know, or what are willing to sacrifice if you do not have love.'

- Without love—your speech, your knowledge, your sacrifice—mean nothing—zero.

What you say

13:1—"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."

- 'tongues of men'—'intelligent human languages'—some in the church had that gift, to speak a language you didn't know—it was a 'sign gift'—and in some instances God allowed men to speak of Christ and give the gospel to people in their congregation who spoke another language
- Paul portends, 'If I could speak with language inspired by the HS...'
- And, by extension—'eloquent speech'

² Ibid.

- In other wds, 'If I could speak eloquently...if I was the most gifted communicator...'
- Paul also speaks hyperbole about angelic language—the intelligent speech of angels (if there is such a thing...we don't know for certain).
 - In other wds, even if there was an angelic communication—and you could do that and rise to that level where you could bring the message of the gospel in a 'heavenly dialect'
 - 'If I could speak the most eloquent human dialects and the most eloquent heavenly dialects...'
- Paul is saying, 'If I could master the words of men and even of angels'—(and the Corinthians would highly admire and praise that)—but 'without the practice of love, I'm a clanging cymbal'

'but do not have love'—Lit 'but love not having'—the idea is not mere possession but demonstrating the character of love...true love that is proven by conduct—if I don't have that, I'm like a noisy gong

- In the ancient world, a gong was a sound played to summon a servant—it was monotone, and when continued, it was annoying
- 'I have become' (perfect tense)—meaning 'a past action with continuing results'—'I'm an annoying sound...and that doesn't change...it's still annoying ongoingly'
- When something is spoken, even the most eloquently, and there's no love expressed, it's 'annoying noise'
- A 'clanging cymbal'—Lit 'the hanging thing that clangs'
- It doesn't matter what your speech is, or how polished you are, or how you can woo the crowd—it doesn't matter how many hear it/how they respond to it, or how many follow you—it's empty apart from a heart of genuine, Christ-like love
- You can be the most gifted speaker/the most profound orator—but once you have spoken, apart from having love, it's like an empty theater with a hollow sound ringing—it's nothing—it's heard but no one is helped by it.
- That's profound because you want to speak the truth and articulate it carefully—you want to impact the people God allows you influence with—but apart from love, it's an annoying sound echoing in an empty room.
- Sidenote: the pagan worship services, that benefitted no one spiritually, used noisy gongs—so, Paul is saying in effect, 'You're no different than the pagan leaders in your town...you're an offense to God...sounding like pagan worship'

Appl—The Corinthian's speech did not edify nor give clarity to the prophetic word.

- 'Speech without love is empty noise'

What you know

13:2—"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."

- Paul championed the gift of prophecy (14:1)—was a great gift to be a channel of truth/insight/understanding
- 'and know all mysteries and all knowledge'—in other wds, be able to answer any and every question on any subject in the universe. Can you imagine that ability???

- ‘...and if I have all faith’—in other wds, ‘If I could be the one guy in the church that inspires others in the face of the impossible/the worst of circumstances...the one guy that trusts God and infects others with faith’
- ‘so as to remove mountains’—that’s faith like Jesus had
 - To ‘move mountains’ was a Jewish proverbial saying that meant ‘making the impossible possible’—to ‘remove insurmountable barriers’
 - A person of great faith (like Jesus or the Apostle Paul) would be highly recognized and admired in the Christian community

If you can know all that and do all that and yet, without love, it not only amounts to nothing—he says, ‘I am nothing.’

- Faith without love is ineffectual...
- You can imagine that you are superior—that you have all these great gifts—that you have all this great knowledge and insight, but if there’s no demonstration of sacrificial love, it amounts to nothing—you are ZERO in God’s assessment.
- It matters not what degrees you’ve earned, what books you’ve written, what books you’ve read.
- The Corinthians were already educated under the Greco-Roman system—and God gave the believers amazing spiritual enablements—and they turned them upside down by their absence of love.
- They congratulated themselves...and they were nothing.

13:3—“And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor...”

This is a charitable willingness to part with earthly possessions

- Lit—‘if I parcel out all my property for food’—in other wds, to ‘feed the poor’ (implied)
- In other wds, ‘if I dole out my possessions over a lengthy period...
- The principle: ‘if I spent all my life, all my resources, discipling others and helping others, but have not love, I would be a false guide’

“...and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.”—some translations, instead of ‘surrender my body to be burned, have ‘give over my body in order that I may boast’ (NET).

- This may refer to giving your body over to martyrdom.
- Love is summed up in verses 4-8, not in these things: speech, intellect, charity
- Love is not even wrapped up in personal sacrifice/generous giving.

Even ‘self-sacrifice’ can be self-centered without love...ultimately, it is futile.

If love is not in any of those things (1-3), then they are nothing before God—it profits you nothing.

- There’s no real joy, no real fulfillment, no real blessing—it’s a zero.

2. The character of love.

13:4—“Love is patient”—‘patience’—is the ‘capacity to be wronged and not retaliate’

- ‘Love on the inside (the heart) looks like this on the outside (patience)’

- Patience doesn't have to do enduring the trials of life that are out of your control—we must trust God because he's ultimately sovereign over our circumstances
- Love is seen in reference to people, not circumstances. That's the predominate way the wd is used in the NT—in reference to people, not circumstances or events.
- Love is to suffer long with people—the ability to be inconvenienced or wronged—over and over—and, yet not be upset or angry.
- 1 Thess 5:14—"We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone."
- makrothumia=long + passion—Lit 'long-suffering'—to 'suffer long' with people...no matter what people do to you—when people are weak, insensitive, and unruly and collide with you—people who are not patient with you, who are insensitive with you.
- To 'bear up under provocation without complaint' (BDAG).
- Christians today have become much better at reigning in the explosive, outward anger at others—but at the same time, we've become skilled at retaliating below the surface.
 - Just because you didn't punch someone in the face doesn't mean you are patient with them—because in your heart you're resenting them.
 - The question is: 'What's going on in your heart??'
 - Later in the chapter, Paul will say that 'love doesn't take into account a wrong suffered'—there we'll talk about forgiveness. But here, he's just talking about bearing with others—with their weaknesses—to 'love them regardless'
- Retaliation seems to be a virtue in our society these days—we make movies extolling retaliation—we make heroes of those who 'fight back'
- In the Greek world, non-avenging love was viewed as a weakness—thus, only Christians demonstrated this kind of love.
 - A Christ-like love refuses to 'return evil for evil' (Rom 12:17).
 - We saw this in Ephesians 4:2—"with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,"
- Love doesn't just refrain from harming others—it seeks to be useful and beneficial towards others—just look at the next characteristic—'love is kind'
- Many of the Corinthian church members has been wronged—lawsuits, the poor were neglected at fellowship dinners, etc—and a loving response would have been kindness and goodness.

"love is kind"—it means being 'loving, merciful' (BDAG)

- 'gentle in behavior'
- In other wds, love is not simply withholding retaliation, it moves forward in doing good to them instead.
- From a root wd that means 'useful, gracious, kind'—the idea is 'to do good' to them—it is active goodwill—it doesn't just feel good, it does good.
- JM: "Just as patience will take anything from others, kindness will give anything to others, even to its enemies."³

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., 1 Corinthians, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 339.

- We live in an evil world with depraved sinners—that gives us an almost endless list of opportunities to show love in kindness.
- At the moment someone is mistreating you, these characteristics must rise up in you. Why??? Because we're to treat others as we are treated by God himself—we've 'tasted the kindness of the Lord' (1 Peter 2:2-3).
 - To be impatient and unkind is to accept all the kindness of God and give none of it to others.
- That's why the Scripture warns us in Romans 2:4—"Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"
 - God's loving forbearance is demonstrated by his holding back wrath toward our rebellion—his kindness is shown in his countless expressions of grace and mercy.
 - This is how we're to show love towards others.
 - If you want to see someone change—show kindness in love
 - Do you bless those who trouble you??? Or are you just smiling while resenting them in your heart???

Appl—Here's what we do. We rationalize with God about the resentment and bitterness and anger that we hold in our hearts.

- 'Lord, I just gave a significant amount of my time and resources...I just taught a great Bible study...I serve behind the scenes...'
- It doesn't matter—it's a noisy gong if no genuine love in your heart towards those who mistreat you
- Love is making yourself useful to people.
- What is in your heart??? Are you just 'tolerant'??? Or, do you move toward them with kindness???
- Patience is not keeping a list of wrongs and then dumping on them when you get the first opportunity. That's sinful.
- Do you 'give a blessing instead'??? Do you respond to evil with goodness and kindness???
- When you are impatient and unkind, you are being proud and unloving. Today, professing believers are more unloving than any other time in history.
- 1 Peter 3:9—"not returning evil for evil or insult for insult but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing."
- What people ought to see when they look at our lives is kindness towards those who trouble us...even your arch nemesis
- This is what Jesus meant by 'they will know you are Christians by your love for one another'

JM: Says that the first place to test this kindness is in the home.

- The Christian husband that is kind to his wife and children
- Christian children that are kind to one another—we don't mean 'kind feelings' toward one another, but 'do helpful things' for each other, even to the point of sacrifice
- You have to give up your selfishness and adopt a spirit of 'loving-kindness'

"[love] is not jealous"—the term can be used both negatively and positively—meaning you could have an earnest desire for a good thing

- God's love is a jealous love—he desires allegiance
- Perhaps the Corinthians did desire good things in the way of gifts, wisdom, etc. But those desires are only good if the context is desiring the good of others.
 - Do you want wisdom to lead and serve the body of Christ??? Or, to serve you in your rivalry???
 - Do you desire certain gifts so that the body is served well, or are they for your own satisfaction???
 - Some at Corinth were jealous of the gifts others had, and those who had certain gifts closed their hearts to those who did not. That's not love, Paul says.
 - Jealousy leads to strife and division (3:3)—you can see that played out in chapter 12.

Here, the wd refers to having 'intense negative feelings over another's achievements or success' (BDAG)

- Love and jealousy are incompatible—they are opposites

Jealousy has a twin

- Jealousy is: 'I want what they have'
- Envy is: 'I don't want them to have what they have'
- Do you desire the demise of your rivals???

Appl—Do you find yourself comparing yourself to others and then complaining about what you don't have or what you're not getting??? That's not love.

Jealousy is no small sin. Prov 27:4—"Wrath is fierce and anger is a flood, But who can stand before jealousy?"—in its extreme, jealousy has a viciousness like no other sin.

- James 3:14-16—"But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing."
- 'selfish ambition' is driven by jealousy—it's the wrong kind of wisdom—it's being clever in your jealousy, but is demonic and destructive

Q—Are you glad for the successes of others???

Q—Are you content with where God has you???

Q—Can you bloom where God has planted you with the gifts and skills that he has provided???

Q—Are you thankful for how God has blessed you, your family, your brothers and sisters in Christ??? Or, are there other things pulling at you???

Love is not jealous.

Next time: "love does not brag and is not arrogant"—'bragging' is merely provoking others to jealousy. Jealousy puts others down, bragging builds us up.