

THE NECESSITY OF LOVE

1 Corinthians 12:27-13:3

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We live in a narcissistic culture that does not understand godly love. This is the case among even Christians today. *Narcissism* is defined as love for self. The word comes from Greek mythology and the god Narcissus who was in love with himself. Our culture is defined by this self-serving love. Love is based upon the actions or characteristics of another person, “I love you if...” or “I love you because...”

Alan Redpath tells the story of a young woman who came to his office desperate and despondent. She said, “There is a man who says he loves me so much he will kill himself if I don’t marry him. What should I do?” “Do nothing,” he replied. “That man doesn’t love you; he loves himself. Such a threat isn’t love; it is pure selfishness” [from John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, 329]. This man typifies what many call love today. The lines are blurred between real, biblical love and selfishness or self-serving love.

The love that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13 is anything but self-serving. This was especially important for the Corinthians to understand who, as we have seen, were using their spiritual gifts for self-gratification rather than in spiritual service to the body. Paul’s message to them in this text, and to us as well, is clear: *spiritual living is not reflected in the spiritual gifts themselves but in how one displays these gifts*. Spiritual fruit is more important than spiritual gifts, and the first and chief characteristic of this fruit is love (Gal. 5:22).

I. An Exploitation of Love (12:27-31a)

In v. 27 Paul continues his emphasis on unity through diversity in the body of Christ, “**Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.**” We are part of one body, the body of Christ, yet we retain our individuality, our diversity. All of chapter 12 stresses the unity that should be apparent in the body of Christ, but was missing at Corinth. Having shown by illustration how the physical body functions in this way, each part contributing to the whole (12:14-26), Paul brings the illustration over into the reality of the spiritual body, the church, by showing how there is a definite structure in the church as appointed by God.

He begins with gifted men who God appointed to receive revelation from Him and carry on the work of the church. The first of these gifted men is that of “**apostles.**” These men were commissioned by Christ and given the specific role of receiving revelation directly from God as it pertained to the gospel of Jesus Christ and His church. The truth they received is the very truth upon which the church was established and serves as the pillar of our faith.

The second group of gifted men, that of “**prophets,**” were also primary instruments of divine revelation. They received words directly from God and spoke those words to the people of God. They always spoke, “Thus saith the Lord.” Given the nature and purpose of both offices of apostle and prophet, that of receiving revelation directly from God and relating it to the people, both of these offices ceased when God completed His revelation in the Scriptures. These offices have now been assumed by the office of elder, though not in a revelatory way.

The third gifted person that Paul gives is that of “**teachers.**” In Paul’s context, the teacher was to give instruction in the Old Testament and the teachings of Christ. The teacher was not to give new revelations of God, but was to impress upon the minds of the people the truths of God’s Word. “**Teachers**” today serve the same role. The teacher is to mine the depths of God’s Word

and present it to the people in a way that will exhort, correct, guide, and rebuke. The pastor also fulfills this role today, though a teacher must not necessarily be a pastor. All pastors are teachers, but not all teachers are pastors.

Paul then moves from specially gifted men in the church and returns to gifts themselves. We have already commented on the gifts of miracles, healings, and tongues noting that these were verification gifts of the apostles and ceased with them. The gifts of “**helps**” and “**administrations**” are rather self-explanatory. “**Helps**” refers to those specially gifted to serve others in need. They are able to recognize a need and quickly formulate a plan of action. “**Administrations**” refers to leadership, one who is able to organize well and direct the day-to-day affairs of the church.

Paul closes this section again reminding them that not all people are spiritually gifted for service in the same way. This series of questions is rhetorical. Just as the parts of the physical body are given to function in a particular capacity, so God’s church is structured in a way that He appoints certain people and equips them with certain gifts to carry on the work of the church.

Notice Paul’s conclusion in addressing the wrong emphasis on spiritual gifts, “**But earnestly desire the greater gifts.**” While this verse is difficult to interpret, context helps us. The entire discussion in chapter 12 surrounds the abuse of spiritual gifts, the gift of tongues in particular. If you notice, Paul always mentions tongues last in these lists. The Corinthians had made the gift of tongues one of the greater gifts, one that they maintained that all believers should seek to have. While Paul does not discount the gift of tongues, as we will see in chapter 14, he calls tongues a lesser gift. He here exhorts the Corinthians to be zealous for other gifts that are more useful to the body as a whole, again, for the common good (12:7). “**But earnestly desire the greater gifts**” is a rebuke to those who had placed a greater spirituality on tongues than they should have. Paul is exhorting them to have a better understanding of the purpose of spiritual gifts.

The Corinthians, by their abuse of gifts in seeking to serve self rather than the common good, were exploiting or misusing the love of Christ that should have been the impetus by which these gifts are to be exhibited. Curtis Vaughan reveals their error in judgment, “The gifts do not necessarily make one a better Christian, but love will. Love will also help one to recognize (and desire) the best gifts, and will prompt one to use them effectively” [*1 Corinthians*, 133].

II. The Excellence of Love (12:31b-13:3)

The “**more excellent way**” that Paul sets forth to describe in this chapter is the way of love. Paul interjects these positive words about love in the middle of his discussion on the abuse of spiritual gifts. It serves as a reminder to all of us to remember the love of God and Christ towards us, a love that is exemplified by giving, not taking.

The word used for “**love**” in this chapter is one of three words for “love” from the Greek language. One is the word *erōs*, which essentially refers to sexual desire. We get our word “erotic” from this Greek word. *Erōs*, according to Curtis Vaughan, “is always self-centered and grasping, ever seeking its own satisfaction. Because of the base associations of this word, it was never used in the New Testament” [*1 Corinthians*, 133]. The second word is *philia* and is used to denote a brotherly or familial love and is found in numerous places in the New Testament in referring to a common love between people. The third term, and the one used in this text, is *agapē*. This word was practically unknown in nonbiblical Greek and came to be used by the New Testament writers as the fullest expression of love. It has nothing to do with lust or self-

seeking, but is a self-giving love born out God's love for a person and the resulting love that person has for God and others. It is the willing, joyful desire to put the welfare of others, even our enemies, above our own interests. It is this love that we are commanded to have towards God and our neighbors (Lev. 19:18; Luke 10:27).

As we work our way through this chapter, ask yourself the question, "Do I love others and truly 'walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma' (Eph. 5:2)?"

1. Our speech without love is nothing (v. 1)

Whereas Paul ends each of his lists with the gift of tongues, he opens this section on love with tongues. This further emphasizes the abuse of tongues in the church at Corinth. Paul forthrightly tells them that if love does not undergird their exercise of this spiritual gift, no matter how often or how brilliantly their display, then it is worthless. As we will see, this point is true for all spiritual gifts.

As I have noted earlier, I believe the gift of tongues has ceased. However, the principle here is the same as it relates to our speech. As Leon Morris points out, "*The tongues of men and of angels* almost certainly refers to the gift of 'tongues', but the expression is general enough to cover speech of any kind" [*I Corinthians*, 177]. Paul's hypothetical illustration ("if") suggests that no matter how eloquent our words, if they are self-serving, they produce nothing.

Our words to others must be of the Spirit, not of the flesh. As we read earlier from James, the tongue is very powerful, unable to be tamed. Our words often tear down rather than build up or enflame rather than soothe. Our speech is often self-serving and reveals what is really in our heart. *Our words and our heart always go together.* Jesus taught this in Mt. 15:18, "But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man." Paul speaks the same truth in a positive way in Romans 10:8-10, "But what does it say? 'THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART'— that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰ for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." Both Jesus and Paul understood the truth that our words indicate what is really true about us. Our words reveal our passions, our desires, and whether these passions and desires are selfish or loving.

Paul's rebuke to these at Corinth is a reminder to all of us to guard our hearts and our speech. No matter how eloquently we may say something, if it is not in love, then it is as "**a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.**" Paul's choice of metaphors here is interesting. A well-timed gong or a properly placed clang of a symbol can be wonderfully pleasing in a musical movement. I think of the symbol clashes in "The Star-Spangled Banner" that add a spectacular feeling to the movement. But where a well-timed gong or clash is quite meaningful, an ill-timed or misplaced one is chaotic and can ruin the entire song. That is Paul's description here. If our speech is anything but tendered by the love of the Spirit then it causes chaos. This will become more evident in Paul's discussion on tongues in chapter 14.

Are your words, all of your words, sprinkled in the love of the Holy Spirit? Do you seek to build up others with your speech or do you, like these at Corinth, seek to manipulate others with your words? Be honest with yourselves in this area. The tongue is powerfully destructive when driven by a heart that is consumed with pride and selfishness.

2. Our ministry is nothing without love (v. 2)

Paul mentions three more gifts in v. 2, “**prophecy**,” “**knowledge**,” and “**faith**.” Paul also mentioned these gifts in chapter 12. The first two, “**prophecy**” and “**knowledge**” deal directly with God’s revelation. “**Prophecy**” refers to the act of prophesying by a prophet who had received revelation from God to declare to the people. Paul does not minimize the importance of prophecy or the office of prophet because, as we saw earlier, he ranks it second to the office of apostle. However, as we saw, with the giving of God’s final revelation in His Word, this office and the act of prophesying ceased in a revelatory way and the proclamation of God’s revelation has been assumed by the elder or pastor.

The second gift is the gift of knowledge. “**Mysteries**” refer to those things that know man could know on his own. “**Knowledge**” and “**mysteries**” go together to show those things that could only be known by revelation. Again, with the ceasing of revelation came the cessation of these gifts.

The third gift is “**faith**.” While faith is a gift common to all who have faith in Christ, Paul here refers to the miracle-working faith he mentioned earlier 12:9. This faith was a special gift given to those to attest miracles in the early church. This gift has also ceased today.

However, even though these particular gifts have ceased today, just as with the gift of tongues, the principle that Paul relates here is the same for us today as it was for these at Corinth. While we may not have these knowledge and power gifts today, we can still abuse gifts just as the Corinthians did. And we can certainly cause chaos with the intellect that God has given to us through the Spirit’s illumination of the Word. As Leon Morris points out, “The Corinthians clearly thought that the possessors of certain gifts were extremely important people. Paul stoutly maintains that if they even have the highest of gifts, and that in full amount, but lack love, not only are they not very important; they are actually *nothing*” [1 Corinthians, 178]. Charles Hodge was very direct, “Satan may have, and doubtless has, more of intelligence and power than any man ever possessed, and yet He is Satan still. Those, therefore, who seek to exalt men by the mere cultivation of intellect, are striving to make satans of them” [1 & 2 Corinthians, 268].

Our minds, much like our tongues, can be used for great good or great destruction. You might remember the fault that is addressed in the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2. They were strong in doctrine, great in intellect, able to test the spirits and discern false apostles. However, they became proud, and Christ said that they had left their first love (Rev. 2:2-4). Their indictment was that though they were great in doctrine, they did not speak the truth in love, from a heart that was being shaped and molded by their first love, Jesus Christ.

We need to heed that warning today. Those of us that are serious about the Scriptures and hunger and thirst to know more must remember that every conversation we have with those that may not be as mature or may not cross their “t’s” and dot their “i’s” with us theologically must be tempered with love. If not, Paul says, “**we are nothing**.” This does not mean that we are not firm where we need to be firm. On those doctrines that are essential to the Christian faith we must stand firm. But we must stand firm in love. On those things that we can agree to disagree with others, we do so in love. There is nothing worse than one being dogmatic on something that is non-essential. That’s what the Corinthians were doing, and they lacked love.

3. Our deeds are nothing without love (v. 3)

Paul concludes this section on the excellence of love, “**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**.” Paul says two things here.

First, it does not matter how benevolent you are if you do not have a right motive, a motive born out of love. Donald Grey Barnhouse told the story of a young boy named Willie. Willie and a playmate were out skating on a pond one day when the playmate fell through the ice. Willie was watching from the bank and crawled out onto the ice and rescued the young boy. Praise and admiration were being heaped on him. Then a lady asked him, “Tell us, my boy, how you were brave enough to risk your life to save your friend.” In between breaths, Willie shot back, “I had to – he had my skates on” [from Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel*, 38]. Our acts of benevolence are important. But if we are doing them for our own benefit, whether expecting something in return or simply to be noticed, then Paul says it profits us nothing. Our deeds must spring from a heart filled with the love like Christ had for the poor. A *giving* love, not a *taking* love.

Second, it does not even matter if you give your life for a person or a cause. If it is done so with an impure motive, such as selfishness, then it profits you nothing. Remember our illustration in the opening about the man who tried to coerce a young woman into marrying him by threatening to take his own life. As Pastor Redpath pointed out, this was not love; it was pure selfishness. Contrast that with the story of William Tyndale. Tyndale was tried and convicted for translating the Bible into the King’s English. His sentence was death by execution. He was brought forth to the place of execution, he was tied to the stake, strangled by the hangman, and afterwards consumed with fire, at the town of Vilvorde, A.D. 1536; crying at the stake with a fervent zeal, and a loud voice, “Lord! open the king of England's eyes.” Even in his death, his concern was for the king. His motive is further shown by these words from Tyndale, “I call God to record against the day we shall appear before our Lord Jesus, that I never altered one syllable of God's Word against my conscience, nor would do this day, if all that is in earth, whether it be honor, pleasure, or riches, might be given me” [from *Fox's Book of Martyrs*]. To his dying breath Tyndale’s motive was for others and that they might know the truth of God’s Word. The Bible is replete with stories of martyrdom out of love, the greatest being our Lord’s. For the very men that were executing them, Jesus cried out, “Forgive them Father, for they know not what they are doing.” The difference in these stories is that one man threatened to *take* his life, while Tyndale and Jesus *gave* their lives. Do you see the difference? The difference is in what was truly motivating them. One was self-serving; the others were serving others and ultimately God. As W. Graham Scroggie remarked, “The pages of Christian history show that men will fight and die for Christianity, who will not live in its spirit, which is love” [*The Love of Life: 1 Corinthians 13*, 30; from Curtis Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 135]. That type of love profits a man nothing.

Conclusion

Paul’s message in these verses is summarized as follows: “The one indispensable gift is Love. If one were to have all the special gifts in the highest perfection, without having Love, one would produce nothing, be nothing, and gain nothing” [Robertson and Plummer].

I recently finished reading an excellent book entitled *Princeton and Preaching*, a book on the life and ministry of Archibald Alexander, one of the many pastoral and theological giants that taught at Princeton early in the 19th century. In his lectures, Alexander stressed the importance of the minister cultivating a love for Christ (p.106). I have taken some of his thoughts and adapted them for our use in closing this morning. They are fitting words to help us in serving others with our gifts from a love that swells from the love of Christ in us.

1. The strongest inducement to be entire and unreserved in love towards others is the love of Christ in you.
2. If your hearts are filled and warmed with this love of Christ, you will never be satisfied with any thing short of a genuine love for others.
3. The terms of discipleship as laid down by Christ require you to be unreserved in your love towards others.

I ask again this morning, “Do you love others and truly ‘walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma’ (Eph. 5:2)?”