

THE SUPERIORITY OF LOVE

As we begin here this morning, I'd like to review for just a couple of minutes where we have been so far in our series on "The Importance of Love in the Life of the Believer."

We started, of course, with God's love to us and the foundational truth that if it weren't for God's love to us, there would be no such thing as salvation from our sins. Love is the soil in which our spiritual life begins and grows—and love is the foundation on which our faith is founded (Eph 3:17).

We then looked at—and attempted to comprehend—the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of the love of Christ that passes—surpasses—knowledge (Eph 3:18-19). We saw how John made that love personal to him—he knew and believed the love God had to him (I John 4:16)—and that changed him from a Son of Thunder to the Apostle of love.

And we looked at reminders from the lips of Jesus Himself that the first and great commandment—not suggestions—is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk 12:30) and that the main proof of our love is obedience to Christ's commands. "If ye love me, keep my commandments" we read in John 14:15.

Although we got away from this series for a few Sundays to focus on the cross and resurrection, we really didn't go very far from the concept of love. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13) was exceeded by the One who laid down His life for His **enemies** (Rom 5:10). Even last Sunday, when we looked at Jesus' appearing to the disciples that first Easter evening, His message to them was "As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you." The Son was sent to this wicked world out of love for us; in love for our fellow-man—and obedience to our Savior—we are to take that message to the world.

In a nutshell: We love Him because He first loved us—and we are to love others because He first loved us. Take your Bibles and turn to I Corinthians 13. I don't believe a study on the "Importance of love in the life of the Believer" would be complete without an examination of what is commonly known as the great "love chapter" of the Bible.

Before diving into this chapter, I want to do two things. One, I'm going to say right from the start I will be using the word "charity" and "love" interchangeably. Why? Because *charity* is translated from the Greek word *agape* all 26 times it is used in our King James Bible. Why is "agape" translated "love" roughly 115 times—and "charity" 26 times? I have no idea—and didn't think it was important enough to try to find out!

Secondly, I believe there are some things we should realize about the believers in Corinth that might help us better understand and appreciate Paul's teaching on love.

1. Problems in Corinth

I'm not listing **all** the problems of the church in Corinth and I'm not giving you **every** reference that demonstrates those problems. Also, for the sake of time I will be going through them rather quickly and will not comment much on them as we go. As I read through them, though, we ought to be asking ourselves these questions: "Is Paul describing me? Am I guilty of some of these sins?"

A. Divisions (I Cor 1:10-13)

I Cor 1:10-13 (see also I Cor 3:4-6)

Shouldn't be divisions; shouldn't be factions; shouldn't be pitting one leader against another because we are to be following Christ—not men—and Christ is not divided (v 13)!

B. Immorality (I Cor 5:1)

C. Pride (I Cor 5:2, 6)

D. Defrauded one another (I Cor 6:6-8)

To defraud means to deprive someone by deception or fraud. In other words, they were ripping one another off!

E. Self-centered; didn't care about others (I Cor 12:18-26)

F. Coveted "flashy" spiritual gifts (I Cor 12:28-31)

They wanted the flashy gifts—working miracles, healing, speaking in tongues, and interpreting what was spoken in tongues. Paul's response in verse 31: 'Go ahead and covet—earnestly desire—the best gifts' "and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way." Now look at the end of chapter 13, verse 13: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the **greatest** of these is charity." Chapter 14, verse 1: "Follow after—pursue—charity...."

It is against this backdrop, then—particularly in regards to spiritual gifts—that Paul gives us this very detailed look at what love is. Some of you might be thinking: 'Why are you telling us this, Pastor? Is some of this going on in our church? No—praise the Lord—to the best of my knowledge, we do not have **divisions** in the church.

But many of the sins I just mentioned are secret sins. Immorality in this case was out in the open, but immorality in the form of an affair or pornography are not. Pride and self-centeredness are sometimes obvious, but oftentimes they are quietly growing in the heart before they burst forth in the form of anger. Covetousness and envy are often not expressed out loud, but they are there nonetheless and what starts out as a **root** of bitterness can lead to us becoming a **tree** that produces bitter, harmful fruit.

The pursuit of love is not just for believers who are struggling with sin, though.

2. Pursuit of love is for all believers

A. It was to be pursued by the Corinthians—a carnal church (I Cor 14:1)

B. It was already practiced—but needed to increase—by the Thessalonians—a faithful church

I Thess 1:7-8 "So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing."

I Thess 3:12 "And the Lord make you to **increase and abound in love one toward another**, and toward all men, even as we do toward you:"

I Thess 4:9-10 "But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. ¹⁰ And **indeed ye do it toward all the brethren** which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye **increase more and more;**"

C. It was pronounced by Jesus as proof that we are His disciples (John 13:35)

John 13:35 "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."

Here's the litmus test for others to know whether or not you are a disciple—do you have love one to another? If you were "put on trial," so to speak, would there be enough evidence that you love others to "convict" you of being a follower of Christ? If not, we are failing to love one another the way we should!

3. The Preeminence of love

A. Love is superior to great speaking (I Cor 13:1)

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." So what does Paul mean when he says to "speak with the tongues of men?" Isn't that how we normally speak? Pretty hard to speak without having a tongue. I won't grab my tongue and hold it while speaking to prove my point because most of you have probably already tried it at one time or another! Maybe you've even taken it a step further and stuck your tongue on a cold piece of metal in the winter time!

So what is Paul saying here? If the only reference to “tongues” we had was in verse 1, it would be difficult to know exactly what Paul was getting at. The context, though, helps incredibly. I Cor 12:28 & 30 refer to speaking in tongues, so does ch 14. In fact, the word “tongues” is used 16 times in Chapter 14! Most commentators suggest—and I agree—that Paul’s reference to speaking in tongues in chapters 12, 13, and 14, refer to the miraculous gift of speaking in a **language** that is known by the hearer—but not necessarily by the *speaker*.

“Speaking with the tongues of men,” then, I believe refers to...

i. The quantity of speech; the amount of people we can speak to

I want to explain this a little more so let’s **turn to** Acts 2, beginning with verse 1.

--v 4 “speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

--v 6 “...because that every man heard them speak in his own language.”

--v 7 “...all these which speak are Galileans” – they are the hicks; the un-educated

--v 8 “And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?”

Verse 6 heard in their own language; verse 8 they heard in their own tongue. Language and tongue are used interchangeably.

--v 11 “...hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.”

Imagine how neat it would be to speak a language you have never learned! My wife and I will be going to Yosemite NP at the end of May. There will be tourists there not only from the United States, but from literally all over the world. Wouldn’t it be cool to walk up to someone from Japan and be able to start talking to them in Japanese? Or to speak French...or Spanish...or German?

Enough on “speaking with the tongues of men.” What does Paul mean by “speaking with the tongues of **angels**?” Are there any references in the Bible to a special language used only by angels? No; there isn’t. So what does Paul mean by that phrase? Two thoughts:

1) Paul could just be making a point of exaggeration. ‘If I could speak all the languages in the world—and even speak the language angels speak if there is such a thing—it would be worthless noise if I didn’t have love.’

2) Maybe it means the accuracy—the perfectness—the quality—of speech. Did any of God’s angels ever fail to perfectly speak what God wanted spoken? It is possible, then, that Paul could be referring to...

ii. The quality of speech; the excellence with which we speak

Think about the quality of our speech. What person would not want the ability to speak the **right** thing at the **right** time to **every** person **every** time? Imagine the ability to always say the right thing to your spouse...or child...or boss...or neighbor...every single time. Can anyone do that? No; no one ever has and no one ever will, but Jesus did!

What if I had the ability as a preacher to craft a perfect sermon every time? What if I could use words in such a way as to amaze and impress and make people laugh or make people cry. What if I was the best orator in the world and could move people to action every time I preached?

Paul says if he were like that—or if you or I were like that—but had not love, we would be like sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. It is noteworthy that “sounding brass” and “tinkling cymbals” were both used in pagan worship in Corinth. Paul, in essence, was saying your speaking—regardless of the eloquence and power—would be as helpful as **paganism** if you didn’t have love.

Second, not only is love superior to great speaking,

B. Love is superior to vast knowledge (I Cor 13:2a)

Notice verse 2: “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge...”

“Prophecy” in the NT carries two ideas. One has to do with “fore-telling”—predicting—the future. The other has to do with “forth-telling”—proclaiming—the truth. We see the “forth-telling” meaning in I Cor 14:3 “He that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort.” How is it being used here in verse 2? I certainly won’t be dogmatic, but I lean toward it being “fore-telling” and predictive because it is tied in with understanding mysteries and having knowledge.

Paul was being used of God to unfold “mysteries” —previously hidden truth—as he was writing new revelation. God used Paul to reveal to us much about the rapture and resurrection, but God used **John** to reveal the truth about the tribulation period and about heaven.

Paul is saying ‘if I had the gift of prophecy where I understood **every** future event and **every** correlation between the Old and New Testament and could wisely help **every** man with **every** problem’—but had not love—“I am nothing.” I have no value; I am no good to anyone.

C. Love is superior to perfect faith (I Cor 13:2b)

Look at the middle of verse 2. “...and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains...” Imagine what it would be like to have perfect faith; a mountain-moving faith? Never have a doubt creep in; always get what you prayed for; do the miraculous that would have people in awe over the greatness of God! No human would ever claim to have that kind of faith and no human will have that kind of faith, but Paul says even if you did—but didn’t have love—you are nothing.

D. Love is superior to sacrificial giving (I Cor 13:3)

Verse 3 “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”

Does anyone bestow ALL their goods to feed the poor? In Luke 21 Jesus tells the disciples that the poor widow did. Everyone else gave out of their abundance; she cast in what she needed to live on. None of us probably give to that extreme, but even if we did, it would profit us nothing if done for the wrong reason. We can be like the Pharisees and give alms to be seen of men as Jesus warns us against in Mt 6:1-2. We can give grudgingly instead of cheerfully and we can give **our money** to God but not our hearts.

And even if we did give ourselves—even if we were called upon to sacrifice our very life for Christ and be burned at the stake—if we did it for any reason other than love it would profit us nothing; it would be worthless.

MacArthur writes: “So what you have here is a very solemn testimony to the importance of love. The loveless person, verse 1 says, produces nothing of value. Verse 2 says the loveless person is himself of no value. And verse 3 says the loveless person receives nothing of value.”

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

1. **What** are you pursuing? To desire to be used of God speak to many—and to desire to speak well—is a good pursuit. It is good to pursue knowledge; it is good to have faith; and it is certainly good to give sacrificially. The number one pursuit we should have, though, is to love God and love others.

2. **Why** do we do what we do? It is interesting to realize that all these good things can be pursued for the wrong reasons; they can become all about **us**. Love isn’t all about us—it’s about others.

3. Lastly, are you pursuing **anything**—or are you just kind of drifting along? If these are all good pursuits—but are worthless without love—think how worthless it is to pursue **nothing**?