

## THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY

1 Corinthians 12:31 -13:1-3

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This morning we will examine 1 Corinthians 12:31 -13:1-3 READ IT

Regarding this chapter, Warren Wiersbe once said, "This chapter has probably been more misinterpreted and wrongly applied than any other in the Bible. Taken out of context it has been regarded as 'a hymn to love' or a sentimental sermon about Christian brotherhood. People do not notice that Paul was still dealing with the problems of division, envy, selfishness, abuse of the gift of tongues at Corinth, and behavior that brought disgrace on Christ's name."

Perhaps we too misunderstood this chapter, but I hope its real meaning will be explained as we work through it.

This morning we will see that without love the gifts of the spirit are little value; there is no hope of Christians living in harmony, no maturity, and no everlasting life.

It's universally agreed that Paul is the greatest pioneer missionary, scholar, teacher, evangelist, and hero of the faith. Yet Paul knew that all his brilliance, giftedness, and sacrificial dedication meant nothing if it were not based fully in love.

No other New Testament writer spoke more about love or provided more practical leadership examples of love than Paul.

In all of Scripture nowhere is it more clearly and forcefully stated that love is indispensable to Christians of behavior and lifestyle than in this chapter. To correct the church's misguided views and its overall self-destructive way of behaving, Paul promised to show the Corinthians a "more excellent way" to live.

So, we're talking about love. Unfortunately, in English we have this one word "love" and it means so many things. You say you love your car, you love your wife, you love your dog, you love your new dress and you've got to mean different things. Now the Greeks didn't have that. The English language has one word whereas the Greek language has a multiple of words which eliminates any confusion. In fact, the words in the Greek that are different words, translated love in the English, have absolutely no connection in the Greek so that people wouldn't even relate them. The reason we relate these words is because the English word is the same ... but the Greeks would talk about, for example, erotic love which is the love that we know as a physical attraction between a man and a woman on a physical level. And they have a word for it that is not related to the word love. There is another Greek word related to friendliness, the kind of warm affection that comes when two people become very close, apart from any physical attraction at all. That's a totally different word - unrelated. But the word that is used here in the Greek, the word *agapē* is a word that simply means "the ultimate act of self-sacrifice." It is a word for the ultimate act of sacrificing oneself for the good of someone else.

This is the essence of the highest kind of love. It is an act of self-sacrifice, service toward somebody who does not necessarily care for you emotionally.

- Love your enemies doesn't mean feel romantic about them,

- Love your enemies doesn't mean have a wonderful, warm and happy relationship with them, all of those are impossibilities.

This is precisely the kind of thing Paul is pointing out in I Corinthians 13.

- No matter what a person is like,
- no matter how he behaves,
- no matter how he relates to you,
- seek his highest good.

That's what God did. As God sends his rain on the just and the unjust, so you are to shower acts of self-sacrificing service on the deserving and the undeserving equally.

Now, you'll have to remember that this is not related to emotion but related to will. It is not an act of the emotion, it is an act of the will. To love somebody in terms of an act of valuing is not a feeling but it is a determination that you make in your mind that this is right and this is what you will do. This love was defined by Jesus Christ when he gave us a new commandment to all his disciples to love one another "just as" he had loved them - "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35). This love gives itself in total self-sacrifice for the good of others. John puts it this way, "by this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters (1 John 3:16).

**Paul makes five points in this passage of Scripture that we will examine this morning.**

### **1. Without love even heavenly language sounds annoying (V1)**

The purpose of spiritual gifts was to build up and unite the body. Yet the Corinthians enthusiasm over the supernatural gift of tongues caused pride and disorder in the church body. The independent minded Corinthians used their gifts for personal ego gratification, which caused division within the body. To correct this distortion, Paul captures their attention by hypothetically picturing himself as the world's most gifted tongues speaker, being able to speak eloquently in the tongues of men and angels.

This certainly would have impressed the Corinthians. But Paul declares that even if he had such an exalted experience he would be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal - that is, an annoying, loud, empty noise, - if he did not act in love.

Paul isn't merely saying that his speech would be a clamorous noise, but that he himself would be a hollow, annoying sound. He would not be what he should be; he would be seriously deficient in his Christian life and not living according to the more excellent way.

### **2. Without love knowing it all helps no one (V2)**

Paul then speaks of himself hypothetically as possessing the gift of prophecy in such a full extent that he would know everything.

He would have the theological answers to all the mysteries of God that people crave to understand. He would be a walking, talking, Encyclopedia of knowledge.

Some people love to display their intellect and theological superiority. They are proud of their learning and speaking ability. Such pride had become a serious problem at Corinth. Knowledge without love inflates the ego and deceives the mind. It can lead to intellectual snobbery, an attitude of mockery and making fun of others views, a spirit of contempt for those with lesser knowledge, and a demeaning way of dealing with people who disagree. I know a pastor who has a phenomenal knowledge of the Bible but who hurts many people with his doctrinal scrutiny and has divided his own congregation. **His theology was as clear as ice and twice as cold.**

So Paul states that even if he had an all-encompassing knowledge, apart from love he would be nothing - a spiritual zero.

Ephesians says that only with love can knowledge be used to protect and build up the church.  
**Ephesians 4:11-16**

11 And **He gave** some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,  
12 **for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;**  
13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.  
14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;  
15 but speaking the truth **in love**, we are to **grow up** in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,  
16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body **for the building up of itself in love.**

### **3. Without love risk taking faith is worthless (V2)**

The third spiritual gift Paul presents is faith.

Paul imagines himself possessing the most excellent gift of faith imaginable. Like Abraham he would believe God for the impossible, like David he would race out into battle to kill Goliath. But even with such a powerful gift, if love is not present, the gift becomes a means of glorifying oneself rather than serving others.

Without love, Paul knew he'd would be spiritually fruitless rather than a spiritual powerhouse. Without love, the Christian is on the wrong path of the Christian life. But when faith is combined with love, the body of Christ is built up in and advances forward in a more excellent way.

### **4. Without love giving all one's money to the poor is unprofitable. (v3)**

Paul next considers giving away all his worldly possessions - his home, property, furniture, savings, and all the things he cherishes most - to feed the poor.

He gives it all and reduces himself to poverty. Surely this is the ultimate, altruistic action. Wouldn't such giving be, by definition, love? Not necessarily. Paul makes it clear that the most extraordinary, self-sacrificing action can be done without love.

Annaias and Saphiria are examples of self-sacrifice being done for self-interest. They gave without love. They weren't really concerned about the needs of those in their congregation, but about themselves. They didn't love God or their neighbor. Like many of the most gifted Corinthians, they gave in order to enhance their personal prestige in the sight of the church. They gave to receive the praise of people. They gave to the poor and their church, but without the true, and motivating power of love, so they're giving profited them nothing.

Paul says, therefore, that if he gave all he owned to the poor but did so apart from love, it would be unproductive, useless, worthless, and of no eternal value.

In contrast, when one is moved by love to meet the needs of the poor, giving all of one's possessions profits everyone.

### **5. Without love the ultimate sacrifice of one's life is pointless (V3)**

Finally, Paul envisions himself as the ultimate hero of the faith.

In an act of supreme sacrifice, he surrenders his body to the painful flames of martyrdom for Christ. Certainly that would inspire us to greater dedication, faithfulness, and courage.

But Paul warns us that even suffering and dying for Christ can be done for the wrong reasons. When it is motivated by the welfare of others and the glory of Christ, martyrdom becomes the ultimate sacrifice of love.

And Jonathan Edwards book, "Charity and Its Fruits", he writes, "God delights in little things when they spring from sincere love to himself. A cup of cold water given to a disciple in sincere love is worth more in God's sight than all one's goods given to feed the poor, yea, then the wealth of the kingdom given away, or a body offered up in the flames, without love."

#### **Let me conclude with this:**

Imagine for a moment what the Corinthians must have thought when they first heard Paul's words read publicly in the congregation. They probably couldn't believe their ears! Paul's message was contrary to their entire way of thinking and behaving. They were deficient in love and they didn't even know it. Their pride of knowledge and miraculous gifts had deceived them.

In Paul's way of thinking, nothing has lasting spiritual value unless it springs from love.

Verse 1 says: "The loveless person produces nothing of value, just noise."

Verse 2 says: "The loveless person is himself of no value, I am nothing."

Verse 3 says: "The loveless person receives nothing of value, it profits me nothing."

Just a big nothing.

D.A. Carson, Bible commentator and professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, describes Paul's reasoning in this passage in terms of "divine mathematics"

According to divine mathematics, "a five minus one equals zero". Or, gifts minus love equals zero.

Close your eyes and imagine in your mind, a blank piece of paper.

In your mind write on the paper an entire row of zero's.

Keep adding zero's until you have filled a whole line on the page.

What do they add up to? Exactly nothing. Even if you were to write a thousand of them, they would still be nothing.

But put a positive number in front of them and immediately they have value.

This is the way it is with our gifts and faith and zeal. They are zero's on the page. And without love they count for nothing. But put love in front of them and immediately they have value.

And just as the number two gives more value to the row of zero's than the number one does, so more and more love can add exponentially greater value to our gifts.

Without love, our most extraordinary gifts and highest achievements are ultimately fruitless to the church and before God.