



The Greatest Gift

Kicking It Off

Who is someone who did something kind for you that they have probably forgotten, but you never did?

Read:

1 Corinthians 13

Summary

This is the passage everyone wants read at their wedding, and it is almost always pulled out of its setting. Paul did not write it about romance. He wrote it in the middle of a long argument about spiritual gifts, to a church that had plenty of them and had started keeping score. The chapter before it is about the body, the eye and the ear and the hand, all different and all needed. The chapter after it is about using gifts when the church gathers. This one sits in between and tells us what makes any of it count.

His answer is blunt. Speak in the tongues of angels, prophesy, understand every mystery, have faith enough to move a mountain, give away everything you own, and if there is no love in it, you have gained nothing. The gifts are real and God really gives them. The problem starts when a gift becomes a statement about my ability instead of an avenue for His love to reach someone.

Jesus is the model. He turned water into wine, He fed thousands from a boy's lunch, and when He was hungry in the wilderness and could have turned a stone into bread, He would not. The power was never in question. He simply never used it for Himself.

That leads to the part people usually skip. Love is patient with the person who will take fifteen years to come around, when everything in us wants a faster return. Love is kind to the person who walks in angry and has done nothing to deserve it. Love is not resentful, even when we could build an airtight case for why our resentment is earned.

The last section reframes everything. The gifts are temporary and will pass away when Jesus is here in person and nothing more is needed. Love is the one thing that carries over. We see dimly now, in part, and what we see is still real. So

the question this week is not whether you have a gift. You do. The question is who it is for.

Significant Quotes from Sermon

- "The gift is not the point. Every gift, however remarkable, amounts to nothing when love is absent from it."
- "Jesus always used His power to bless others and not Himself, and the miracles were always to display the glory of His Father."
- "If you say your cup is not full, then the answer is simple. You need to spend more time with Jesus. Not so He will fill your cup more, but so He will remind you of the identity that has already been sealed in Him."
- "The Lord looks at the one who is going to take fifteen years and says, that is My guy. I am willing to wait."

Discussion Questions

1. **Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?**
2. Paul lists the most impressive gifts he can think of and says every one of them adds up to nothing without love, which means the value was never in the gift itself. **Where are you most tempted to treat something you are good at as evidence of your own worth rather than as something given to you for someone else?**
3. A lot of us have absorbed the idea that we cannot pour out until we have taken care of ourselves first, and the passage points somewhere different, to a cup already filled by Christ. **What would change this week if you truly believed you had already been given everything you need?**
4. The Lord is willing to spend fifteen years on someone we would have written off in a month because He is patient. **Who in your life have you quietly stopped expecting God to reach, and what has that cost you?**
5. Most of us can construct a solid case for why our irritation with someone is justified, and Christ has a better case against us that He does not act on. **What resentment are you currently defending, and what would forgiveness actually require of you?**
6. Now we see in a mirror dimly, so love arrives in ordinary and partial ways, through a meal, a conversation in the parking lot, a person who stops and prays with you. **What is**

one specific way you could hand something you have to someone else this week?

Sermon Notes

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 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.

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Outline

1. The Gift Is Not the Point (vv. 1-3)

- a. Paul stacks the highest gifts (tongues, prophecy, knowledge, mountain-moving faith, martyrdom) and sets love against every one of them. Without love the gifted person is a noisy gong, gains nothing, and is nothing.
- b. The gifts are real and the Spirit truly grants them. The error is making the gift a statement about my ability rather than an avenue for God's glory.
- c. Jesus shows the pattern. He turned water into wine, fed the five thousand, fed the four thousand, and never once used that power for Himself. In the wilderness Satan does not question whether He can turn stone into bread; Jesus refuses because the miracle would have served Him instead of others (Matthew 4:1-4).

- d. The great commandments are to love God and love others (Matthew 22:37–40). The standing danger is that we substitute loving ourselves and call it stewardship.
- e. Once a gift is used to secure something for me, it stops functioning as a gift and becomes a transaction, run on my power rather than His.

2. Love Is a Character, Not a Uniform (vv. 4–7)

- a. Paul describes love with verbs, so love is known by how it acts and not by one prescribed form.
- b. Because God is love (1 John 4:8), the list reads as a portrait before it becomes a standard. Jesus is patient and kind, does not envy or boast, is not arrogant or rude, does not insist on His own way, is not irritable or resentful.
- c. Patience and kindness cut against our metrics. We want conversion on our timeline, and the Lord looks at the person who will take fifteen years and waits. Kindness in the church is usually transactional, extended to the people who are kind to us, and love is what welcomes the person who walks in angry.
- d. Not irritable or resentful is the hardest line, because we are skilled at building the case for why our resentment is justified. Christ has every right to that case against us and does not act on it.
- e. Love rejoices with the truth rather than at wrongdoing, so it corrects rather than flatters, and it celebrates the moment truth clicks in someone.
- f. Bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things describe generosity, not credulity. Love verifies the truth and still believes God can vindicate and save the person everyone has written off, because our timeline of judgment runs about thirty years and His is complete.
- g. So love cannot be boxed into a single shape. The many gifts of chapter 12 become the many avenues for the one love.

3. Now in Part, Then Made Perfect (vv. 8–13)

- a. Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge pass away because they belong to the age of the partial. Love never ends.
- b. We see in a mirror dimly now and then face to face. The mirror is not a complaint, it is an accurate description of where we stand.

- c. The gifts will cease when the perfect comes for a simple reason: Jesus will be here, and whatever needs doing He will do. Until then the partial is still the Lord's chosen means, so the gifts are needed now.
- d. Giving up childish ways means giving up selfishness. A mature child is the one who cuts the hot dog in half and hands over the chips.

Notes

I have preached this chapter at weddings more times than I can count, and I tell the couple the same thing before I agree to it. I will take 1 Corinthians 13, as long as you let me say what I actually think it is about. They expect a talk on love and I give them a talk on Jesus. That is not a clever way to make a familiar passage feel new. It comes from John, who says plainly that God is love. If that is true, then love is not a concept I define on my own terms and then apply to Him. He is the definition. So when I read this chapter I am not reading a list of qualities to aspire to. I am reading a face.

That matters more here than at a wedding, because of where the chapter sits. Paul has just spent a chapter on the body, where the ear does not look like the eye and the eye does not function like the foot, and none of that is a defect. It is the design. Most of us have no trouble agreeing that God equips the saints, and what we do with that agreement is where the trouble starts. We begin cataloguing which gift is ours, administration or worship or teaching, and somewhere in the repetition the gift stops pointing to God's glory and starts being about what I am able to do.

Jesus shows me how a gift is supposed to work. He turned water into wine at a wedding so people could enjoy it, and He took a boy's five loaves and two fish and fed five thousand with leftovers. Then in the wilderness, hungry after forty days, He was offered a use for that same power. Satan never questions whether He can do it, so the conversation is not about ability at all. Jesus refuses because that particular miracle would have served Him instead of someone else. Every miracle He performed blessed another person and pointed to the glory of His Father, and the one He declined would have done neither. That is why I cannot read this chapter as an interlude about feelings. Paul is telling a church full of gifted people that their giftings must be administered in love, or they are null and void.

So he stacks the best of them. Tongues of men and of angels, prophetic powers, all mysteries and all knowledge, faith enough to move mountains, giving away everything, handing the body over to be burned. None of these are bad things, and without love they are noise, leaving the person exercising them with nothing gained. The two great commands have not changed and neither has the danger. The pull is always to love yourself instead, and I hear that pull dressed in

reasonable clothing all the time. In order to love others, do I not need to love myself first? In order to serve, does my cup not need to be full? I understand the logic. It is exactly how love works in the world, and it is a transaction rather than a gift. The moment I am securing my portion first, I am operating on my power and not His.

In the economy of the gospel, He foots the bill. That is what the cross settles. He gives us His life, His righteousness, His holiness, and He holds none of it back. Your cup is not something you have to protect and fill before you serve. It is overflowing already, because you have been given the righteousness of the eternal God and forgiven of every sin. If it does not feel full, the answer is not to withdraw and take care of yourself first. It is to spend more time with Jesus. Not so He will top you off, but so He will remind you of an identity that has already been sealed in Him. When you meet with Him, He sends you back out to love people, and He sends you as yourself, in the gifting He gave you, not in an imitation of someone else's.

The list in verses four through seven is where most of us slow down, and I want to read it the way I actually hear it, with the name of Jesus in the place of the word love. I do not do that to put Him in a box, but because our ceiling for what love could be is far too low. Patient and kind is the hardest line for me, because it is the first thing people outside the church tell me is missing, and usually because the leaders who showed them God were neither. Our structures do not help, since we want efficiency and speed and numbers, and patience appears nowhere in that system. If someone will take fifteen years to fall in love with Jesus, and another person down the road might take a day, our metrics tell us where to spend. The Lord looks at the one who will take fifteen years and says, that is My guy, I am willing to wait. Kindness runs the same way, because being kind to people who are kind to us costs nothing. I am talking about the person who walks in surly and angry and has done nothing to earn a welcome, and love says, brother, we are glad you are here.

Not irritable or resentful is where I have to be honest about myself. I am a passionate person and I get bothered quickly, and in ministry people hurt you, disappoint you, and go back on their word. I have become an excellent attorney on my own behalf, able to lay out the case for why my irritation is warranted, complete with the list of everything that was done to me. The Lord has a far better case against me and does not act on it. Plenty about us grieves Him, how we treat one another, our greed, our laziness, showing up on Sunday carrying burdens we never bothered to bring Him, and He does not respond with bitterness, because love does not.

Then Paul widens it. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth, so it corrects rather than flatters, and it celebrates the moment truth

finally lands in someone. That is also why love believing all things is not gullibility but generosity. Love will verify what it is told and still refuse to give up on a person, even one who has done something real and must serve the sentence for it. When people press me to declare where someone will spend eternity, my view of the truth covers about thirty years and His covers all of it. That is why I say love is a character and not a uniform, defined by what it is like rather than by one way it has to look, which is the whole reason this chapter follows a chapter about the eye and the ear and the hand. The moment we box love up so it becomes controllable, we have boxed up Jesus. Aslan was never a tame lion. He is not at our disposal; we are at His.

That is what verses eight through thirteen finally say out loud. Prophecies pass away, tongues cease, knowledge passes, and love never ends. We see in a mirror dimly, then face to face, which I do not hear as a complaint about our condition but as a description of where we stand. The bride has not yet been unveiled to the groom, and when she is, the gifts will cease for a straightforward reason. Jesus will be here, and if anything needs doing, He will do it. Until then we live in the partial, and the partial is still His chosen means, so your gifting is needed now. It is often not the sermon that does the work. It is the meal afterward, the welcome at the door, the brother or sister who stopped and prayed with you on the worst day of your week. You experience the love of God through thousands of avenues, because that is how many ways He has equipped His saints.

What has to go is the childish way, and the childish thing is selfishness. Spend a week at VBS and you will see it, a little boy pushing every boundary he can find because pushing gets attention and attention feels like love. Maturity looks like the kid who gets his meal, sees someone without one, and cuts his hot dog in half. We are also good at using our imperfection as an exit, reasoning that since Jesus is the only perfect one we should step back and let Him handle it. Jesus is using you. That is the point of the Counselor He promised.

The greatest gift you have ever received is that Christ loves you with a perfect love, and every love you know is a fraction of it. If you have held a baby and known you would die for that child, your Father in heaven loves you more than that. So you have a gift, whether it is your abilities, your personality, or something you would never think to call a gift, and you have a choice. You can use it for yourself and build a fairly decent life, full of the people you chose to love, keeping your cup full to the brim. Or you can use it by the power of the blood of Christ, and love the people He put in front of you.

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