

1 Corinthians 13

January 23, 2022

[1] 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.

Main Idea:

God - who is the source of love and demonstrated the sacrifice of love - uses us to complete the story of love.

The Source of Love is God

The Sacrifice of Love is Gain

The Story of Love is Great

Our passage today is a familiar one. In fact, many people who have never cracked open a Bible would recognize it. It's the famous "wedding" Bible passage. Taken at its face-value reading - it's a solid piece of poetic prose. It has beautiful, flowery language in our English translations. It seems to have practical advice on what love is. It has all the markings of one of the most "feel good" passages in all of Scripture. And it is a beautiful passage. It should be read at weddings! Especially since love should be the foundation of every marriage.

But, this passage about love has a context. When Paul wrote these words, inspired by the Holy Spirit's direction, I don't think he originally intended for these words to merely be a pleasant reading at a wedding. Because you see, while these words were written for us today, they weren't written to us back then. They were written to a group of people, who were following Jesus, but honestly, were immature, irresponsible, and even immoral.

As a way of review through this letter so far, Paul had to deal with a church with divisions along preference, and along leadership lines. "I follow Apollos, I follow Paul, I follow Cephas" and then the people who passed Sunday School class, "I follow Jesus!" There was jealousy, there was strife.

Things had gotten so bad among the believers in Corinth, that they were suing one another. They went to the courts of law in a corrupt empire to solve their petty disputes, rather than go before the church to resolve the issues with righteousness.

To go further, issues of sexual immorality were grossly tolerated. Quarrels about food sacrificed to idols. Immodesty in their worship services. Abuse of the Lord's Supper - both in ignoring the meal's significance and in ignoring the needs of others. And we'll see in the weeks ahead: disorder in their worship and their gifting.

To me, it seems like Paul has to break in the middle of all this and get back to the nitty gritty. Back to the fundamentals. He has to tell them what love is. I can imagine Paul writing this with exasperation in his voice as these words are penned. Like a stern, disappointed parent kneeling down to his children, who really ought to know better by now. *"Love is patient..." "Love is kind..." "It doesn't envy! It doesn't insist on its own way!"* Come on, guys. You should know what love is!

That may not be the case, of course. I just now like to imagine Paul writing it that way.

But the point remains for us today: What is love?

Is it a feeling? Is that feeling explained by chemical processes in our brain?
Is it an action? Is it just actions? Or can seemingly loving actions be empty of love?
What is the purpose of love?

To help answer these questions, we're going to look at three points from our passage today:

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And those three points form the main idea of today's message: **God - who is the source of love and demonstrated the sacrifice of love - uses us to complete the story of love.**

Because God is the source of love, demonstrates the sacrifice of love, and is completing the story of love, we can love others.

So, first: **The Source of Love is God.**

In this passage, Paul uses the Greek word “agape” in describing this love. In the Greek, there were four main words for love that were used by the New Testament authors. And that’s helpful, because in English, we mostly just have the word “love” to describe a whole host of emotions and different kinds of love. “I love you” or “I love my wife” or “I love my job” or “I love bread...” I obviously don’t love my wife and children on the same level as bread. It’s close. Really, really close. But obviously it’s not the same.

So, in the Greek there was the word “agape” used here in the passage. We’ll explore that further in just a moment.

There is “storge” love - often referring to the love a mother has for her children. It is a mutual, instinctual love. Paul would describe those without “storge” love in Romans 1, as people who are “disobedient to their parents, senseless, faithless, unfeeling, and unmerciful.”

Next, there is the Greek word “eros” used to describe the deep sense of attraction felt between a husband and a wife. It’s obviously where we get our modern word “erotic” from, though that might have different connotations than what the word originally mean. It is more of a passionate love - either good or bad. The Greek OT uses eros both to describe Israel’s idolatry and sexual immorality, but is also used in the book of Proverbs with the father’s instruction to his son to passionately love, or “eros” Wisdom - personified as Lady Wisdom.

There was also “philia” love - the kind of love reserved for friends, or a type of general attraction to something. Like, Philadelphia is the “city of brotherly love” (phila: friendly love; delphi: city) or hydrophilic, means that a substance is “attracted to water.”

This distinction between phileo love and agape love is seen most starkly when Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection. He asks Peter three times: “Peter, do you *agape* me” and three times Peter responds, “Lord, you know that I *phileo* you.” In effect, Peter wasn’t answering Jesus’ question.

Agape love is something deeper than what storge, eros, and phileo have to offer.

Throughout the New Testament, we see the apostles using the word agape as the divine love, or the highest form of love. It is always used in reference to the type of love that God has for us. It is not a feeling or emotion. Rather, it is used as a love that flows out of the choice, out of the free will to love, with the intention for the highest good for the object of this love. In other words, agape love flows out from God. He is this love, and the source of this love.

John the apostle writes, “God is love” or “God is agape.” The very nature of God is love. In fact, the very nature of God as Trinity proves that God is love.

Theologian Michael Reeves, in his book "Delighting in the Trinity" explores the depth of what it means that God is Trinity. That God is three distinct persons in one - Father, Son, and Spirit. Three persons united in one.

He writes, "God is love': those three words could hardly be more bouncy. They seem lively, lovely and as warming as a crackling fire. But "God is a Trinity"? No, hardly the same effect: that just sounds cold and stodgy...Yes, the Trinity can be presented as a fusty and irrelevant dogma, but the truth is that God is love because God is a Trinity."

Throughout eternity past, the Father was loving the Son, who was loving the Spirit, who was loving the Father, and on and on. Within the one God exists a triune community of love, that is in perfect harmony. Reeves writes, "Here is a God who is not essentially lonely, but who has been loving for all eternity as the Father has loved the Son in the Spirit."

This agape love then, that exists as Trinity, is the source and center of all creation.

In his essay entitled, "The Four Loves", C.S. Lewis expounds on these four loves: philia, storge, eros, and agape. Regarding agape, Lewis explores what the difference is between the other "natural" loves to that of agape. He realizes that all the other types of love one could hold find their source in God's agape love in the moment of creation - not because God *needed* to create us, but that *wanted* to create us - out of His pure love.

He writes, ""What then is agape or love itself? Love itself, God's love, is utterly disassociated from need. It is manifested first in creation and then in redemption. The doctrine that God was under no necessity to create is not a bit of useless and abstract scholasticism. It is essential, for it reveals the nature of agape: that which in itself is complete, self-sufficient, eternally blessed, which has no wants to satisfy, creates what it doesn't need, creates because it desires to give, and gives seeing in the very moment of creation the necessity for the crucifixion.

In other words, agape love flows out from the triune God not because of obligation or necessity. It is a love that wants to be shared, experienced, and spread. At the heart of agape love is not self service, but outward blessing, creation, and beauty. And in the very nature of agape love being outwardly blessing, God's agape love knows that sacrifice is a key to that kind of love. At the moment of creation, God knew the crucifixion would be needed.

Agape love, in the presence of free will, knows that pain will be part of the equation. But God's agape love is so powerful, that it loves through sacrifice.

And that leads to our second point: **The Sacrifice of Love is Gain**

Before we look at what we gain through the sacrifice of agape love, we must realize what we don't gain by counterfeit, or empty actions.

Going back to our passage, Paul writes:

[1] 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.

Just before this passage, Paul had started the section of his letter to the Corinthian church by informing them regarding spiritual gifts and using the diversity of their giftings to create unity in the body. Among the variety of gifts that the Spirit gives for the common good were wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, prophecy, discernment, and both speaking and interpreting tongues.

These gifts were not to be seen as competing or lesser in anyway, but together, each one with his or her gifts was to use them to function with unction as one body, as we learned last week.

But again, Paul here in chapter 13 has to interrupt the flow of thought to give this lesson in love. That the centerpiece of these gifts is agape love, or outward service and sacrifice, rather than personal ability.

Paul uses these three examples as rhetorical devices that love must be primary driver of these gifts. Agape love, rather than mere actions or abilities, is the most excellent way.

[1] “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...”

Now, the gift of tongues is a controversial topic, and without getting too much into it here, there are a few views on what Paul is saying here.

First, most would affirm that one of the manifestations of the Spirit’s gift of tongues is the supernatural ability to speak in a human language not known to you, but understood by another in order for the Gospel to spread. This is exemplified at Pentecost, where everyone gathered in Jerusalem to hear Peter’s preaching could understand what he was saying in their own language.

Second, some affirm the gift of the Spirit to include the ability to speak in an unknown, heavenly language that is spoken by members of the spiritual realm. Others, however, view this statement of “angelic tongues” by Paul as hyperbole, or making an exaggerated claim that you could speak in any tongue imaginable - both known and unknown, earthly and heavenly.

Whatever the case, the point remains that if agape love is not behind the gifting and ability to speak in tongues, and sacrificially serve others using that gift, you sound just like a noisy cymbal. We can imagine the comparison. A clanging cymbal makes us cringe, cover our ears, and wish it would stop. It even hurts to listen to a clanging cymbal. So it is to speak in the tongues of men and of angels - without love. It’s adding to the noise.

[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.

The same applies here. In today's day-and-age of self-proclaimed prophets - who seem to know precisely when the end times will be, when Jesus is coming back, who will be elected next, and who apparently know what the "secrets" of the Bible are - these so-called prophets aren't doing so out of love. They may fill their pockets with donations and book buys from gullible believers, they may have a massive social media following, but what is the point? Are these prophecies and bits of "knowledge" edifying the church in love? Are they leading people to repentance and humility and service? I'd say most likely not. That it is ultimately nothing without love.

[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.

In Paul's day, and even in many religious practices today, there is this idea that deprivation leads to a more fulfilled, transcendent faith. Whether that meant depriving oneself of earthly belongings, or even more seriously depriving oneself of food and drink, these practices of what is called "asceticism" can be seen as outward signs of holiness, but in reality, they mean nothing - especially in a community of agape love. Now to be certain, there are times where fasting from food or something else is a necessary part of our spiritual discipline and practice. Or as another example, rejecting excesses when others in the community are struggling. But, when these practices of deprivation are a means of self-righteousness, rather than others experiencing the agape love of God, they mean absolutely nothing in leading to love, repentance, and being truly born again.

As Paul says elsewhere, in Colossians 2:23, regarding the harsh regulations that some were following:

[23] These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (ESV)

If actions, giftings, knowledge, and practices don't have agape love at the center of their intent, they are worthless, lead to self-righteousness, and nothing is gained.

So, how do we truly love? What does sacrificial, agape love look like?

[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.

Although Paul does not explicitly mention Christ in this paragraph, we know that this type of love was perfectly, concretely, historically expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, love has a name - his name is Jesus. The source of love, the Creator of

all things out of love with the Father and the Spirit, laying down his life as a sacrifice to demonstrate what it means to truly love.

“But God demonstrates his own *agape* for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

And it is because he sacrificially loves us, that we can and ought to love one another.

Or as John says in 1 John 3:16, “we have come to know *agape* by this: that he laid down his life on behalf of us, and we ought to lay down our lives on behalf of the brothers.”

Or, as C.S. Lewis says, ““God, who has loved us into existence, loves us into the power of loving our brethren.”

This list Paul provides, of *agape* love being patient, kind, not envious or boastful, rejoicing with truth, bearing all things...It is not an exhaustive list, or merely a checklist: “Just follow these seven simple rules and you too, will love like God.” No, instead they form a pattern of what a transformed, born again heart looks like through the power of the Spirit. These are the outward expressions, or the fruit, of a heart rooted in the source of all love.

But loving like this is indeed a process. And we are all in that process, together. We are all living in the story of God’s love- from creation out of *agape*, to the sacrifice of *agape*, to the end of the story, when the perfect comes. So, point #3: **The Story of Love is Great.**

[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.

This is the side of the story we find ourselves in today. Christ died, he has risen, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, claimed victory over sin, Satan, and the grave. But the end has not yet come. This is what many call the “already, but not yet” portion of the grand story of creation and God’s love.

As we saw a few weeks ago in our teaching through the significance of Communion - we are in the betrothal, or time of engagement before the wedding. A time of waiting and purification until the bridegroom, that is Jesus, comes back to consummate His Kingdom.

And it is in this “in-between” phase that Jesus promised a gift, a helper until the time of his return: that is, the Spirit. And it is the Spirit that leads and guides and equips us in this church age. That is the purpose of the gifts of the Spirit: prophecy, knowledge, tongues. The purpose is

to equip the community of believers to endure this age until the age to come. These gifts are not the end-all. They are a means to an end. They are to help us, in a partial way, until the perfect is realized; until all is complete; until heaven and earth are fully reunited.

That is why Paul says that these gifts will pass away. There will be a time where they won't serve a purpose any longer. Proclamations in tongues about the good news won't be necessary - the good news will have arrived! Prophecies and partial knowledge of the future won't be necessary - they'll be fulfilled!

And when these gifts are no longer needed - only agape love will remain.

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

Our Faith will be made complete by Sight
Our Hope will be made complete by our eternal Salvation
But Love continues on into Eternity.

That is why Paul can say love is the greatest. All these things serve a necessary purpose now: gifts, faith, and hope. But eternity will be filled with love.

The same love that spoke at creation, the same love that was sacrificed on the cross, that same love will continue on into eternity with the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the community of believers.

We long for that day. Until then, however, we see as in a mirror dimly. It's interesting that Corinth was actually very well known for its production of the highest quality, polished, bronze mirrors in the Greco-Roman Empire. Gordon Fee comments that a comparable metaphor in contemporary cultural "would be the difference between seeing a photograph and seeing someone in person. As good as a picture is, it is simply not the real thing."

On this side of eternity, we are longing for the real thing. Longing for the "perfect" - for all things to be made right, as creation was intended to be. But while we long for and wait for that day - we must love sacrificially through the Spirit's gifting and power.

C.S. Lewis again on implementing agape now and into eternity to come:

"Such I conceive as the world of agape: a world of unbounded giving and unashamed receiving, where all blessed creatures need and know that they need nothing but God and are therefore set free to love one another...And so your love shall be like His, born neither of my need nor your deserving but of plain bounty...For where agape is, there in some degree, is heaven."

When we sacrificially love now, it is a glimpse of the love that will go on for all eternity. It is part of the eternal life, that starts now!