

If I Don't Have Love

1 Corinthians 13.1-3

Overview

“You people are only about love, love, love, . . .” we often hear in a derogatory manner. And to that I would simply answer, “Yes, . . . we are.” Why the emphasis on love? Because God is love, 1 John 4.7-9. And, upon our conversion, the Holy Spirit poured God’s love into our heart, Romans 5.5. It is the first of the nine characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5.22-23. It is the foremost Christian virtue. Without it, as we will see in this lesson, Paul says, our acts of service and ministries are worthless. If Satan can keep us from loving others, then he has succeeded in his mission. It’s “Game Over.” We don’t need to focus less on love, we need to focus more on it.

Through our lifetime we may have known brothers and sisters who have excelled with various talents and gifts but render their actions useless because of a lack of gentleness and love. We may know people gifted in knowledge and wisdom of the Scriptures, but know little about humility, care, and patience with others who may not share their abilities. We may also know someone who gives to others only out of abundance and otherwise, generally cares little about the needy. Though they share in the greatest quantity, without love, it profits one nothing.

The Bigger Picture

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul begins a three-chapter instruction on the proper usage of spiritual gifts. In Chapter 12 he reminds the Corinthians of the variety of gifts given by the Spirit, the origin of those gifts, and how God has arranged the gifts/members in the body just as He sees fit. In Chapter 14, Paul will describe the proper function of these gifts inside the local church body. Sandwiched in the middle he will speak about the most important element: the atmosphere required for the proper working of the gifts. If we do not move with a spirit of sacrificial and caring love for one another, the gifts and talents we possess will actually become a hindrance to the work of the Lord. This must be avoided at all costs.

The Text

NLT:

1 Corinthians 13:1–3 (NLT)

¹ If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn’t love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God’s secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn’t love others, I would be nothing. ³ If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn’t love others, I would have gained nothing.

CSB:

1 Corinthians 13:1–3 (CSB)

¹ If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Explore the Text

1. Why do you think Paul first mentions the miraculous gift of tongue speaking in his list of examples of gifts?
2. What is the effect of tongue speaking if one's heart is not motivated by love?
3. What if we have been blessed with a superlative of gifts, talents, and abilities and have no love? Do our works matter? Explain.
4. Why do you think love is so essential to our spiritual life?

About the Text

It has been said that 1 Corinthians 13 serves as a breath of fresh air in the midst of a book that has been so pointed in its correction of disunity, selfishness, sin, and boasting. You have probably heard this chapter quoted in its entirety in many weddings. And while it certainly fits inside the imagery of a marriage, its placement here, in the midst of a discussion on the abuse of spiritual gifts resulting from selfishness, boasting, and self-seeking ways makes it very powerful. So if we viewed chapter 12 as Paul's description of the placement and variety of gifts and chapter 14 as describing how to use the gifts correctly, then chapter 13 describes the intended atmosphere in which those gifts operate out of love. It is the *even better way* Paul brought up at the end of chapter 12 (12.31). Conflict, pride, envy, or jealousy have no place in the body ... only love.

I. 13.1-3: Love is the Atmosphere in which Spiritual Gifts Operate

- A. The quality of one's spiritual life is not reflected in the spiritual gifts he or she has received but rather, in the fruit one produces, the first of which is love, Galatians 5.22.
- i. The possession of a spiritual gift does not make one spiritual. Walking in the Spirit is what makes one spiritual. Walking by the spirit (Galatians 5.16, 25; Ephesians 4.1; Colossians 3.16) describes the lifestyle or day-to-day obedience of the Christian.
 - ii. Without the fruit of the Spirit, spiritual gifts have a way of becoming counterproductive.
 - iii. The Corinthians had given themselves over to selfish ways where they concentrated first on themselves having little or no regard for others.
- B. 13.1 – This is the *agape* love of action and sacrifice. It is wrapped in humility with a commitment to meet the needs of others. It is void of pride and selfishness, self-glory and vanity.
- i. Love is the only proper motivation for ministry and service.
 - ii. We serve others out of the sacrifice of ourselves to the expectation of God and the sacrifice of our life to meet the needs of others. Any other motivation renders our service useless.
 - iii. The entirety of 1 Corinthians 13 serves as one of the best definitions in the New Testament on what *agape love* is.
 - iv. It is a love more concerned with giving than receiving. It is an act of choice that will love even those who are an enemy.
 - v. 1 Corinthians 16.14: everything a Christian does should be done in love. There is no substitute.
 1. Correct theology and good works are never a substitute for it.
 2. It should be the natural outpouring of who we are because it has been poured into us, Romans 5.5.
- C. 13.1 – *What We Say*: Gifts of Fluent and Potent speaking without love are nothing.
- i. If Paul were able to speak with the skill of the greatest public speaker or teacher, it would mean nothing if he did not speak in love.
 - ii. Paul used this here because it appears that the Corinthians were trying to use their supernatural speaking gifts for their own power and gain. All their speaking had become nothing more than noise.
- D. 13.2 – *What We Know*: Prophecy, knowledge, and faith without love are nothing.
- i. A *motive* is the driving force behind what we say and do. It is the *reason*.
 - ii. If our *reason* for doing something is motivated by the desire for praise, self-promotion, or creating a personal advantage of some sort, the effectiveness of our ministry will be damaged. We must be motivated by love.
- E. 13.3 – *What We Do*: Benevolence and even martyrdom mean nothing without love.
- i. The focus of acceptable service toward others and even the giving of one's life comes from love. It is always for a spiritual purpose.
 - ii. It is never about the praise or blessings that may come for doing them.

- iii. The loveless person produces nothing, is nothing, and gains nothing.⁷

Reaction

1. What makes a person spiritual? Why should our emphasis focus more on the *fruit of the Spirit* than the *gifts of the Spirit*?
2. What is *agape* love? How does it differ from the other aspects of love as used in the Greek language? (*phileo* or *eros*)
3. Read Romans 5.5. Why should love be a natural outpouring of each Christian?
4. What do we think the Corinthians were doing with their supernatural speaking gifts? How did this render their actions useless?
5. What do we mean by the word *motive*? What is the only proper motive for spiritual service?
6. Performing benevolence or making self-sacrifices must never be about oneself. Describe some improper motives that can render these actions void. What must the desire be *for*?

For the Christian Today

Love is *the* essential element in effective spiritual living. James Olthius once said, "Loving is not merely one thing among others that we are called to do. Love is not an additive. Loving is of the essence

⁷ MacArthur, p. 335.

of being human, the connective tissue of reality, the oxygen of life.”⁸ If we take love away, we cannot function in God’s kingdom.

1 Corinthians 13.1-3 describe the world without love. In the verses under focus Paul wants his readers to think of what they say, what they know, and what they do. Eloquent words that are not infused and built on the foundation of love is only noise. Incredible intelligence and knowledge that is void of kindness, humility, and gentleness is unimpressive . . . and a deterrent to Christianity. Acts of kindness and service that are driven by selfish motives have a way of turning people off. (A great example of this might be around the holidays when people are only inclined to give because of a tax deduction. The rest of the year they wouldn’t think about parting with their resources and things.)

Love fills our spiritual life with meaning. It is the supreme Christian virtue. It is the love by which the Father sent Jesus into the world. John 13.1 captures the degree of Jesus’ love: *having love his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.* The last phrase in the verse is significant. We might could say it another way: “Jesus loved them to perfection,” or to the fullest degree or limit. It is the love by which we are to be known:

John 13:34–35 (CSB)

³⁴ “I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Journal

What are some of the improper motives that we may be tempted to use as we approach our spiritual life? What can we do to fight back and reorient our focus to the only proper motive . . . love?

⁸ Um, p. 230.

For Further Study

Read John 13.34-35; 15.9; and Romans 13.8-9. What is the supreme mark of our discipleship? What is behind all disobedience to the Lord? What is behind all true obedience? See 1 Corinthians 16.14.