

## 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 Why Love Trumps All

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro  
[www.calvarydcmetro.org](http://www.calvarydcmetro.org)

For well over a month now we've been looking at the Holy Spirit and the spiritual gifts He gives. Last week we finished looking at an entire chapter that spoke of all kinds of spiritual gifts that God gives to Christians. Look back with me at the end of 1 Corinthians 12 and we'll get a quick recap.

**1 Cor 12:28** And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.

So, He's given us all these gifts – remember, these aren't things we do on our own, these aren't just natural gifts, they're abilities God has given to us for a purpose. And there is diversity – no one person has all the gifts, nor should they. We're all like little snowflakes – isn't that special – all made out of molecules of hydrogen and oxygen, but each formed slightly different than the next for the glory of God. So:

**29** Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles?  
**30** Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

Of course, the answer is no. But, we're told:

**31** But earnestly desire the best gifts.

It's OK to want to receive particular gifts from God. It's OK to have godly aspirations for ministry and service. 1 Timothy 3:1 says, "If a man desires to be an overseer," to hold a position of leadership in the local church – if any man desires that, "he desires a good thing." It's a holy ambition. And the Bible says you should earnestly desire to receive gifts that like.

But, there's one more thing to keep in mind. Notice the very last sentence in 1 Corinthians 12:

**And yet I show you a more excellent way.**

Now that kind of makes you go, huh? What's he talking about? After all this miraculous, supernatural stuff we've just discussed what's better? What's more excellent? It's like he just said that all that stuff about working miracles is JV. What could be more significant? What could be more important? What are we missing?

The answer is love. Read with me in Chapter 13:

1 Cor 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 2 And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. 4 Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails. But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. 13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love.

God knows that we have this horribly monstrous tendency to make everything about us. Have you noticed that in your own life? We are incredibly selfish, self-centered people. And God knows it. He knows that left to ourselves, we can twist and corrupt anything.

So, after telling us about all these amazing, miraculous, supernatural things He wants to do in our lives, He takes a minute to remind us – they’re not just for you – they’re for others and you need to use them in love. God wants to work miracles in and through your life, but it’s not just for your sense of spiritual adventure, it’s almost always for the sake of others.

So here’s what we’re going to do – we’ll spend this week looking at four things that pale in comparison to love in verses 1-3. If you’re taking notes, they’re speech, knowledge, faith, and self-denial. And then next week we’ll dig into what love is and isn’t beginning in verse 4.

The very first thing that Paul tackles is a gift that is still divisive at times today: the gift of speaking in tongues. Paul says it doesn’t matter if you speak with the tongue of men or angels if you’re not speaking out of love for others the words coming out of your mouth don’t matter.

But what are, “the tongues of men or of angels?” Well, there could be a couple of different things going on here.

“The tongues of men” might mean just the ability to speak with eloquence and clarity, to be a gifted communicator. Remember this was back in the days before radio or television or the internet, and so, one of the great forms of entertainment people had was to sit and

listen to others give fancy, polished, moving speeches. And it's possible that God would give you the ability to speak like that, the ability to communicate well in your own language with the tongues of men.

But, it is also possible for the Holy Spirit to enable a Christian to pray or speak in a foreign language, a language they have never known, and that might be a human language like Urdu, or Swahili, or French. Or, it might be a heavenly language that no one else on earth speaks. We see both mentioned in the Scripture.

In fact, in the early days of the church, right after Jesus ascended into Heaven, the Jews all gathered to celebrate the feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Well, a bunch of Jesus' followers, including the disciples, were there too and they were waiting and praying for God to show them what to do next, now that Jesus was gone.

We find the events recorded for us in Acts Chapter Two where it says that while these first Christians were praying the Holy Spirit descended and enabled them to suddenly speak in tongues – in this case, it was human tongues, but it was human languages they didn't previously know. And yet, as they spoke, people who had come to Jerusalem from different countries for the feast suddenly heard these Christians telling the mighty deeds of God in their language.

Obviously that got the attention of a large crowd of people who all wanted to know what was going on and so Peter got up and preached the gospel to them and 3000 people were saved that day in part because Peter and the others were open to God using them in love.

So, the ability to speak with eloquence, or to speak with a supernatural tongue is a gift from God, and we see it in the Bible. It's a gift He can and still does give today. But there's a warning that goes along with it:

**1 Cor 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.**

Instead of 'sounding brass' your Bible might translate that as 'a noisy gong.' I looked up both kinds of instruments and was fascinated by what I found. Both a gong and cymbal are large pieces of round, fairly flat, metal that are hit or smashed together in order to make a noise. They are useful instruments, but neither is particularly beautiful. No one ever wrote a serious concerto for a cymbal or gong. No one is ever described as being a gong virtuoso. And no one ever seriously aspired to be first chair in the cymbals.

Neither the gong or the cymbals are a particularly soothing instrument. In fact, a French composer by the name of Hector Berlioz wrote a *Treatise on Instrumentation* in the 1800s. It described various instruments and how they could be used together in the orchestra. In writing about the role of the gong he said it should be used, "for scenes of mourning, or for

the dramatic depiction of extreme horror.”<sup>1</sup> Cymbals have elsewhere been described as useful for depicting frenzy, fury, or loud parties. Somehow that doesn’t seem like something good to be compared to.

Both instruments can also be heard through the sound being made by all the other instruments. So, if they’re not played right, it’s really obvious - there’s no hiding the mistakes – the noisy gong and the clanging cymbal can distract from everything else that is happening in the orchestra. And so can we, if we’re not speaking out of the motivation of love.

I think this warning is especially relevant today when we have whole sections of the church, especially among the more Pentecostal churches, saying that you have to speak in tongues in order to prove that you’re really mature spiritually. They look at it as some sort of spiritual merit badge, it’s a higher level you attain to. And so people want to speak and try to speak and even outright fake the ability to speak in tongues just for the sake of being accepted by others.

Look, if God wants to give you the ability to speak in tongues – whatever tongue that might be, receive it! It’s God Almighty wanting to break into your life and manifest Himself through your voice – that’s incredible. But at the same time remember, it’s not worth anything if you don’t love others.

2 And though I have *the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*

I think this warning is interesting because the pursuit of knowledge permeates everything we do today. No one wants to be caught off guard, no one wants to be the one person who hasn’t heard, or hasn’t seen. So, we spend time scrolling down Facebook or Twitter or surfing BuzzFeed. We want to know what’s going on in the world, so we have TVs around us all the time with CNN or Fox or MSNBC and they’re scrolling even more data across the bottom of the screen – we have text alerts constantly coming into our phones. Even at work most people are wondering when they should go get that next degree to prove that you know more.

But God says that for as good as knowledge is, it’s not everything - you need to love people. And knowledge, without love, even God-given prophetic knowledge, is nothing.

You all, *we need to chew on that*, because for many of us, actually, I’ll stick my neck out there and say all of us, at some point, all of us have tuned *people* out so we can tune in *knowledge*.

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<sup>1</sup> Macdonald, Hugh (2002). [\*Berlioz's Orchestration Treatise: A Translation and Commentary\*](#). Cambridge Musical Texts and Monographs. Cambridge University Press. p. 286. [ISBN 978-1-139-43300-6](#).

We do it all the time through our phones and laptops – we’re so busy finding out about *something* that we don’t make time for *someone*. And then, we get frustrated with that someone because they’re interrupting my pursuit of ‘knowledge.’

Friends, hear me on this – knowledge is cheap; it’s important, but it’s cheap - you can Google anything.

Our dryer was squeaking pretty badly a while back, it was something I needed to get too but it just wasn’t making it high enough on my list of priorities in light of everything else that was going on. But it was for Mady. So, one day she gets online and searches for some information about it and discovers that there’s a felt liner that separates the drum from the body of the dryer and it can get worn out over time and the thing can start to squeak. So she searches for our dryer model and finds a place that sells the felt pad and they have a video that shows you how to replace it. And she figures, “hey, it can’t be that difficult to fix - the video is only four minutes long.” So, she orders the part, tears apart our dryer, installs the new pad and then puts the whole thing back together. And it worked!

Look, the point is, #1 – my wife is amazing, and #2 - you can Google just about anything. Once again, we can get knowledge.

But you can’t Google a hug. Facebook can’t put a hand on your shoulder. We can find data. God can reveal knowledge. But what’s really important is love and there’s no substitute for it. There are people all around you, even right now, right here in church who need love WAY more than they need knowledge. In fact, after they receive the knowledge you have, they may need love even more – not all prophecy or knowledge is good news. Will you be there for them then?

So, if God wants to give you a word of wisdom, or of knowledge, if God wants to give you prophecy, receive it. That’s awesome. But remember your words mean nothing without love.

And the same thing goes for faith. Many people today talk about faith as if it was something to be pursued all by itself – they say you just need to believe. But that’s silly. What are you believing in? The answer matters.

There are plenty of people that have faith in themselves, they just keep using positive self-talk and telling themselves and others that they’re a champion. They have faith. But it isn’t in God and it isn’t from God.

Faith, all by itself, isn’t worth anything.

And even in the church, faith can run amuck. You can wind up hurting people in the name of faith. You can cast vision for what ministry ought to look like, for a building that needs to be built, or expanded, or a ministry that needs to be grown – very godly sounding things – and you can have faith that God will bring in the millions of dollars that are needed and get

so caught up in the vision and all your 'faith' and 'believing' that you wind up running over people in the process.

You can lead your family into hardship or difficulty and there you are thinking *you're so full of faith* and yet the people around you are bitter and hurt and feel unloved. And then, even if the project or dream comes together they don't care because the *way* you did things overshadowed *what* you did.

We don't need more faith all by itself, we need faith that is exercised in love.

So now we come to our last verse for this morning – verse 3:

**3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.**

OK, this sounds good right? I'm giving myself away – I'm writing checks and even suffering personally. Isn't that very pious? Well, maybe. But maybe not.

It's quite possible for us to give out of guilt. Or out of our desire to be seen as a good person. There are lots of non-Christians who give plenty of money to needy causes. But God doesn't care. God is not interested in our good deeds unless they are motivated by love.

You could even go so far as to give your own body as a sacrifice but if you're doing it out of some selfish pride to prove what a good and charitable person you are instead of out of love, God's still not interested. It profits you nothing.

God wants us to feed the poor – He's very concerned about the suffering on this earth. God wants us to be sacrificial, to be willing to lay down our lives, but He wants all of that to be motivated by love.

Fortunately, the same God that gives us all these spiritual gifts, also demonstrates what love is.

Would you turn with me to the back of your Bibles – find 1 John with me.

**1 John 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.**

Love involves sacrifice and it involves others. You see we can speak in tongues, we have gain knowledge, we can have faith, and we can write big checks... and do it all for ourselves.

But God wants us to remember that it's not about us, it's about Him and drawing others to Him. And so He demonstrates radical love in sending His son to earth – Jesus – so that we might live through Him. God knows we blow it, He knows we're tempted to even use His spiritual gifts for our purposes, for our own benefit, and so He warns us and forgives us when we come to Him and ask.

We're going to celebrate communion this morning and as the ushers pass out the elements, I want to encourage you to take a minute and consider – how am I doing in love? Maybe instead of whatever else you think you need in life right now, what you really need is to receive the love of God and then to show it to others. How are you doing in that? What might need to change?

And then, after you regain your focus on love, maybe God will bring the other thing into your life. Remember, He wants to give good gifts, physical gifts and spiritual gifts, He wants to bless His children, but much more important than that, He wants to make sure we are knowing and showing His love.

Let's pray.