

The Greatest Gift – Part 1

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

I am honored to be able to minister the Word of God to you again this morning. Will you join me by taking your Bibles and turning, first of all, to Galatians chapter five. We are going to use a text or two in Galatians five as a launching point for the study that we will have later on in 1 Corinthians 13. But we want to start in Galatians chapter five.

We are continuing our series on the heart of love. Last week we began by examining love's supreme example, the Lord Jesus Christ in John 13 where we learned that love requires self sacrifice, self humiliation and self control. In fact, the Lord tells us, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."¹

Now, many people will ask the question, "How can I possibly do this?" We are told that we are to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, our mind, our soul, our strength. But we are also to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. How can we possibly do that? The Lord even commands us in Matthew 5:44 that we are to love our enemies and we are to bless those who curse us. We are to do good to those that hate us and pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us. How can you do that?

There is a sense in which we can all say, "The bar is just too high. I could never possibly love like that." Now some, therefore, become frustrated because what they try to do is grit their teeth really hard and say, "You know, beginning today, I am tired of being a selfish, irritable, angry, manipulative controlling gossip. And starting today I am going to start loving like Christ." And then what you end up doing is creating for yourself a number of things that you can do that would somehow be tantamount to loving like Christ and you grit your teeth and you go after it. And in a very short amount of time you are frustrated, you are discouraged and you return to being the same old selfish, irritable, angry, manipulative, controlling gossip that you were. And the cycle kind of goes over and over.

So the question is: How do we possibly become more like Christ especially with respect to this issue of love? Well, the answer is very simple. We have got to learn to walk by the Spirit. And that is what we see here in Galatians five. Notice verse 16. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh."² And in verse 19 the apostle Paul gives us a list of the deeds of the flesh. They are evident, he says. They are "immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these."³

You see, God's law says don't do these things. But the commands of the law are powerless to us. We do them automatically. A man apart from Christ cannot stop himself from these kinds of sins. It is his very nature. We see the battle even with the believer in

¹ John 13:34.

² Galatians 5:16.

³ Galatians 5:19-21.

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verse 17. “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”⁴

So you may please with all your heart, you may desire to love like Christ, but you find yourself failing. So what do you do? You learn to walk by the spirit, or, as verse 18 tells us, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.”⁵ You see, the flesh is powerless to obey the law and the law is powerless to subdue the flesh. This is a work of the Spirit. So we must walk by the Spirit.

Now what does that mean? Well, it simply means to be totally surrendered to the control of the indwelling Spirit of God who will then direct our lives and cause us to bear fruit. It is to have your mind so saturated by the Word of God, written by the Spirit of God, that he literally dominates your life, dominates your thinking, dominates your motivation, dominates your will.

In Ephesians three verse 16 the apostle Paul says that we must “be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man.”⁶ And then, when we are yielded to the Holy Spirit, when our attitudes and daily lifestyle are then submissive to the Spirit as he has revealed himself to us in his Word, then we gradually become more like Christ which includes the ability to love. Notice in verse 22, “But the fruit of the Spirit is...”⁷ And the first one is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”⁸ You see, dear friends, you must understand that love is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not a fruit of your own making.

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians he was trying to correct their confusion between law and grace which are contrasting themes that you see throughout the book. And he makes it abundantly clear that a man cannot be saved by keeping the law, nor can a man live the Christian life by keeping the law, any kind of law, even the laws that we end up making for ourselves.

You see, that was never the purpose of the law. The purpose of the law was to help us to see that we needed something other than ourselves and drive us, therefore, to the Savior. Then at salvation the Holy Spirit indwells us and he becomes the power source causing us to bear fruit which ultimately would be to obey the law. Even as Jesus is the primary person in our justification, so, too, you must understand the Holy Spirit is the primary person that energizes our sanctification. Now this does not mean that we just kind of passively set by and let the Holy Spirit do it all—this mistaken notion of let go and let God—but rather we see here in verse 16 that we are to walk.

Now the grammar here in the original language tells us that this is a command. It is not a

⁴ Galatians 5:17.

⁵ Galatians 5:18.

⁶ Ephesians 3:16.

⁷ Galatians 5:22.

⁸ Galatians 5:22-23.

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suggestion. It is not an option that you may want to consider. It is a command. We are to walk. And it is in the present tense which indicates that this is continuous regular action. This must be an exercise of our will, of our volition to do these things. We must choose to surrender to the Holy Spirit of God on a moment by moment basis. But ultimately what is fascinating is that it is the Spirit of God that empowers us to do that very thing.

We are to habitually live out the truths of Scripture. Colossians 3:16 we read, “ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you.”⁹ Dwell means to literally be at home. Is the Word of God at home in you? Is it welcomed there? Is it what your life orbits around? But this obviously requires our dedicated commitment. We must choose to read the Word, to heed the Word, to allow it to permeate our heart and our mind.

Romans 12:2. We are to be transformed by what? By the renewing of our mind. And the idea there is that that transformation will happen to us without us necessarily even knowing it through the power of the Word of God. In Ephesians five and verse 18 we are commanded, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.”¹⁰ That is another way of saying the same thing. It is to continuously live under the influence of the Holy Spirit by letting the Word of God control us. And as we yield to the Spirit’s control, he causes us to bear fruit and you begin to realize that by his power you are loving like Christ.

This is the opposite of the Legalist who would try, for example, to obey the Old Testament law and/or his own additional rules and regulations to help him somehow be saved, to help him somehow to be pleasing to God. And ultimately all he is doing is living by the flesh, not by the Spirit. And he will be forever frustrated. Some people mistakenly think that if they force themselves to live by certain rules and regulations they have created that they will be able to conquer the flesh and become more like Christ. But just the opposite will happen.

I have seen it many times. Gradually a person begins to take what are really nothing more than their own personal preferences, they begin to elevate them to the status of the Mosaic code and the more they dutifully obey their noble rules and regulations, the more they end up quenching the Spirit of God in their life and the more they despair in their Christian walk, because they are walking in the flesh. They are not walking by the Spirit.

I have Christian brothers I love dearly who are utterly obsessed by rules and regulations that they have concocted. You just pick a subject and they have got a rule for it. They have got some standard that is nowhere found in Scripture. And it is interesting that these rules are always pertaining to externals, not to issues of the heart. And, sadly, they are always frustrated.

I ask you. Have you ever met a Legalist that finally has a completed list, where finally there needs no more revision? They have got it all figured out. Here are the things that if

⁹ Colossians 3:16.

¹⁰ Ephesians 5:18.

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I do this, then my flesh has been conquered and I can be like Christ. It never happens. And, sadly, many times they are not loving which would be a violation of the most important rule we should have. The reason I say that is many times they are spending their life demanding that others conform to their rules. And that can be very frustrating to be around.

But the list is never complete. It always needs more revision. Why? Because the Legalist will continue to inwardly struggle with his flesh because he is trying to live the Christian life on his own power. His conscience is weak. He cannot grasp his liberty in Christ. He doesn't fully understand grace. He doesn't understand the power of the indwelling Spirit. I can speak with authority on this subject because I have been there many times myself.

The apostle Paul had to deal with this, for example, in Romans 14 and 15. You will recall there the Jews and the Gentiles were butting heads in the Church. They were fighting over dietary restrictions. They were fighting over the sabbath, which days to consider religious and so on and so forth, these non essential types of things. And the apostle Paul called that "weak faith"; those who have a sincere, yet an undeveloped faith, not strong enough to help them perceive the full liberty that they have in Christ. Therefore, their conscience holds them to non essentials and causes them to be prone to unfairly judging others. And that is why in the middle of all of that the apostle Paul tells us that we are to pursue the things that make for peace in the building up of one another.

So I would appeal to each of you, especially as we examine this issue of love, to grasp the full measure of the grace of God, to rejoice in the liberty that we have in Christ, a liberty that is found when we obey what Scripture would have us to obey and live within those glorious parameters that allow so much freedom rather than making up our own rules that many times far exceed any divine standard. And then we have got to learn to walk by the Spirit, not by the flesh which will result in bearing the fruit of the Spirit, the first of which is love.

Now with this as an introduction, I would ask you to turn back to 1 Corinthians chapter 13 because this is where we want to focus our attention for the next several weeks. 1 Corinthians chapter 13, a magnificent treatise penned by the apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Now, before we look at the text closely, more often than not this passage is read and applied completely out of context. While its principles are applicable to many situations—to all situations, I should say—they really cannot be properly understood unless you understand the original context. So let me spend a few moments here and explain this to you.

Calvary Bible Church in Corinth was in chaos. It was in crisis and they didn't even know it. You will recall that Corinth was a very wicked city, exceedingly immoral. And the people of Corinth that came to Christ brought into the Church all of their worldliness.

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And you find that much of the letter here is corrective more than doctrinal, even though there is doctrine in it. The apostle Paul is trying to correct all of this chaos.

Now, typical of immature, carnal believers, they were exceptionally factious, all kinds of little cliques going on in the church. One very gifted teacher had ministered the Word of God to them by the name of Apollos and some people were in his corner. Other people, well, they liked Apollos, but they were admirers more of Paul and so they were loyal to him, and another group preferred Cephas and yet another preferred Christ alone. And so you have each of these people feeling superior to the others and they began to isolate themselves in their little cliques. So the apostle Paul carefully addresses a host of problems like this in the first 11 chapters. And then he comes to chapter 12. When he comes to chapter 12 he is now going to tackle the biggest problem of all and that is why he says in verse one, “Now concerning spiritual gifts...”¹¹

So he is going to begin to address this issue of spiritual gifts.

Now, may I remind you that according to chapter one verse seven, they were not lacking in any gift? The believers in the church were fully equipped by the Spirit of God in all of the gifts that were necessary for them to function within the church, to edify the church. So the problem was not a lack of gifts, but that they were misusing the gifts that they had. Those with a less public gift that they would therefore perceive to be less impressive sought a more flamboyant gift in their mind like the gift of tongues, the gift of languages, rather than humbly serving with the gift that God had given them. And then those with the more public gifts, the ones that some would consider to be more flashy were becoming showoffs.

So there was a mess. It was the Corinthian version of *American Idol*. Everyone wanted to be worshipped. They wanted to be idolized. They wanted to be perceived to be the most spiritual and so there was competition in the church. Can you imagine that? Competition in the church. People were self absorbed. They were self willed. They were self exalting, the very opposite of walking by the Spirit. So there was chaos. And naturally there would be a tremendous lack of self sacrificial love.

John MacArthur says it so well, quote, “The truly spiritual life is the only life in which the gifts of the Spirit can operate. The health of spiritual living is not reflected in spiritual gifts, but in spiritual fruit the first achieved of which is love, Galatians 5:22.” He goes on to say, “Without the fruit of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit cannot operate in the flesh or except in the flesh in which they become counterfeit and counterproductive. Through the fruit of the Spirit God gives the motivation and power to minister the gifts of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit, like all of spiritual living comes only from walking in the Spirit. Having a spiritual gift does not make one spiritual. Even having the fruit of the Spirit does not make one spiritual, but is simply evidence that one is spiritual. Only walking in the Spirit makes the person spiritual,” end quote.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:1.

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Now, this is what wasn't going on at Calvary Bible Church in Corinth. So with all of this chaos in the church in chapter 12 the apostle Paul confronts their misuse of spiritual gifts, explaining to them the source of the gifts and their interrelatedness, how that there should be unity even in diversity, that we are one body.

And then if you skip chapter 13 and go to chapter 14, he explains the proper exercise of the gifts, especially the gift of tongues, that miraculous ability to speak lucidly in a language that was entirely foreign to the speaker. But then sandwiched in between chapter 12 and chapter 14 is chapter 13, and there Paul emphasizes the supremacy of love over all of the gifts.

Although the Corinthians, again, didn't lack any gift, they did lack spiritual power and spiritual fruit because they weren't walking in the Spirit which is the source of both. Rather, they were walking in the flesh. And, again, the first fruit of the Spirit is love, **AGAPE** (ag-ah'-pay) love. That is one of the rarest words in all of ancient Greek literature. It describes the love of Christ. It describes the self sacrificial, self humiliating, self controlled love like we examined last week in John 13. That is the supreme form of love. That is the kind of love that seeks the highest good even for an enemy. It is a determined act of the will. It is not an emotion. In fact, that is the love that fulfills the law. We read in Romans 13:10, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law."¹²

So the Corinthians were lacking in this most foundational virtue, this supreme virtue, that of love. You will recall in 1 Corinthians 13 verse 13 we see, "But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."¹³

Folks, without love there will be no unity in a church. Without love there will be no edification. Without love there will be no spirit empowerment. Without love you will have no reward. Without love God is not glorified.

Now think about it real practically for a moment. Think of our own church. We have got folks in our church from all over the world. We have got folks in our church from different families, different cultures, different religious backgrounds, some even speaking different languages, English not even being their first language. We have got people with different preferences, different ideas. Now I ask you, do you think that we are ever going to agree on everything? Sometimes we might think, "Do we ever agree on anything?" And, fortunately, we do.

But the point is, if you pick a category, any category in church life, you are going to find that we won't agree on everything.

I could line 20 of you up, pick a particular topic and I am going to get 25 opinions. That is just how it works. In fact, I have never made a decision as your pastor that all of you

¹² Romans 13:10.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

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have liked. I have never even preached a sermon that all of you would agree with. So how in the world do you maintain unity with all of this diversity? And the answer is, by walking in the Spirit which produces love, the fruit of the Spirit.

If we didn't have love for one another this whole thing would blow up. It would blow up in disagreement and hatred. In fact, we see, for example, in Davidson County here in middle Tennessee do you realize there are almost 1000 churches that would call themselves evangelical. And most of them have been a result of a church split. How sad.

So for these very reasons the apostle Paul addresses these dear, immature, carnal, factious saints at Corinth, our dear brothers and sisters in Christ that we will fellowship with in eternity. It will be fun to talk with them about what all went on there. And that is what we have here in 1 Corinthians 13 that we read earlier.

I have divided this chapter into four sections. We are going to look at the first one for a few minutes here this morning. But the four sections that we see emerge from the text would be, number one, the absence of love; secondly, the attributes of love; thirdly, the assurance of love and, finally, the ascendancy of love. We are going to look at the first three verses this morning, the absence of love in verses one through three.

Now, in these first three verses you must understand that the apostle Paul is using hyperbole to grab our imaginations and to stretch our minds to grasp his point. In verse one he says, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."¹⁴

Now the word "tongues" here, the original language **GLOSSA** (gloce-sah'), especially in this context, would certainly include the idea of the supernatural, miraculous gift of tongues, that ability to speak lucidly in a language entirely foreign to the speaker. And, of course, that would have been a very impressive gift within the church making it, therefore, vulnerable to abuse, vulnerable to counterfeit.

But I believe given Paul's reference here to the tongues of men and of angels, obviously a hypothetical statement since there is no indication anywhere in Scripture that angels speak some special dialect, I believe, therefore, that this must refer to the ability to speak with great eloquence or impressive oratory which, by the way, was highly prized in the Greek culture. So everyone would have understood what he was saying.

So I believe you could paraphrase this passage in this way. He is saying, "If I speak divine truth with supernatural eloquence and with crowd swaying oratory, but don't have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

That is a curious analogy, isn't it? A noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Now, to be sure, there is nothing more obnoxious than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal except, perhaps, the thunderous bass that belches forth from some of the boom boxes in these vehicles that

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:1.

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run around from time to time as young men who are desperate for attention are trying to get it. So a person without love could be considered equally loathsome as that kind of noise, but the Corinthians, I believe, would have understood this in even a greater way, a more specific way.

You see, noisy gongs and clanging cymbals combined even with blaring wind instruments, trumpets and so forth, were all used in pagan worship services in that region of the world, so the people would have been very familiar with that. And along with that hideous cacophony of noise the worshippers in those pagan rituals would speak ecstatic gibberish. We would see the same type of thing today in Pentecostal worship services and some of the fringes of the Charismatic movement. You see the same type of stuff in Voodoo worship. I have seen it in Indian Animism and ceremonies of other pagan religions and rituals around the world.

So the Corinthian believers would have understood what Paul was saying. He is saying basically this. If you speak the revelation of God with supernatural oratory, but you do not have love, if you do not have an attitude of self sacrifice, of self humiliation and self control, your ministry is worthless. It is as abhorrent as the pagan rituals. And what you are doing is as meaningless as their self exalting gibberish.

And then in verse two he mentions three more spiritual gifts as he begins to make his case. “And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”¹⁵

Prophecy here is the public proclamation of the purposes of God that would emanate from divine inspiration and would also include reiterating revelation that God had previously given.

Now let me digress here for a moment so you understand a little bit more about the New Testament prophets. The New Testament prophet, like the apostles, were channels of divine revelation. They had the ability to predict future events. They had the ability to have insight into the mysteries of God. But unlike the apostles who ministered to the Church at large and were commissioned to actually expand the borders of the Church, the New Testament prophets ministered in more specific situations and they were assigned to single local church scenarios. We see this in Acts 13 as well as Acts 15 and other places. Their special function was to provide edification to the body of Christ through exhortation and through comforting the saints.

As a footnote, I believe that upon the completion of the last book of the New Testament canon, there was no more need for this gift and it became obsolete. In fact, you will recall in Revelation 22 and verse 18 there is a pronouncement of a severe penalty for anyone who adds or detracts from the apocalypse in specific and the canon of Scripture in general. So anyone claiming direct revelation from God today, I believe, is a fraud.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:2.

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But this was yet another gift, if you think about it, that could have been or that would have been amazing to see within the body of Christ, amazing to see in the Church and thereby subject to misuse, subject to counterfeit.

I recall back a number of years ago now I was called in to break up a fight in a church. There were two ladies in this church in particular that claimed the gift of prophecy and they had become jealous of one another and there were groups that had aligned themselves with each of these ladies. I never saw it, but they described how that they would get in front of the church and dance with scarves and give their prophecies and so forth. And they began to prophecy all manner of evil against one another and against the other groups. So you can see how quickly things digress once you abandon the Word of God.

So a number of those people knew me and respected me and called me in as kind of a theologian type to help them out. Well, I explained the biblical gift of prophecy exegetically. I explained to those ladies and others in leadership that their gift was a counterfeit gift and that whenever you see women assuming official roles of leadership and teaching within the church that is always a New Testament mark of defection within a church. Well, needless to say, they rejected all of that and fortunately I wasn't tarred and feathered, but everything short of that and eventually the church split. To this day it is nothing more than a religious social club.

But imagine, dear friends, for a moment, imagine the legitimate New Testament prophet in the church, for example, in Corinth where he is proclaiming divine truth. And imagine that he did not have the humility of love. We are commanded in Ephesians 4:15 to speak the truth in what? In love. Imagine if that is not going on. What would it be like to be in a church where there was the faithful proclamation of the truth, but there was no love? What you would have is at some level doctrinal precision without humble submission. And it would end up producing a bunch of arrogant, rude, doctrinally sound robots that nobody would want to be around.

Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet in Jeremiah 8:18. There we read, "My sorrow is beyond healing, My heart is faint within me!"¹⁶ In verse 21 we read, "For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken; I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me."¹⁷ There is the heart of love.

In chapter nine and verse one we read, "Oh, that my head were waters, And my eyes a fountain of tears, That I might weep day and night For the slain of the daughter of my people!"¹⁸

Beloved, does this describe the kind of love that is in your heart?

¹⁶ Jeremiah 8:18.

¹⁷ Jeremiah 8:21.

¹⁸ Jeremiah 9:1.

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In Acts 20 we learn that Paul ministered to the Church at Ephesus, verse 19, “serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials.”¹⁹ We learn of the apostle Paul that because of his great love for his fellow Jews in Romans 9:1-3 we read, “I am telling the truth in Christ,”²⁰ Paul says.

I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.²¹

We read in 2 Corinthians how the apostle Paul wept over the carnal Christians within the church. In chapter two and verse four he says, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not that you should be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.”²² And did not Isaiah tell us of the Lord Jesus that he would be a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief? Why? Because he loved sinners.

In John 11 you will recall how Jesus approached the tomb of Lazarus and he wept. He wept over the plight of sinners whose lives were being destroyed by the ravages of sin and death. In Luke 19 Luke records a very stunning event. You will recall Jesus approaches Jerusalem. And there we read that he weeps out loud over their unbelief, over their rejection of their Messiah. He did not enter the city with joy, but with immense sorrow and with tears flowing down his cheeks.

Pastors, elders, missionaries within the sound of my voice, does this describe the core of your heart? It is much easier to merely speak the truth, but it is altogether another matter to do so in love. Is your heart constantly in a state of mourning over the lost and over the wayward? Do you find yourself often weeping in distress over what you see in your church?

Small group leaders, Sunday school teachers, youth, children’s ministry leaders, anyone serving, I ask you: Do you truly love those that you teach? Do you find yourself sacrificing for them? Or do you just give them your leftovers? I would ask you. Are the people that the Lord has given to you a priority or are they merely a hobby? That will say much about your love.

It is easy to go just through the motions without any passion. If you want to examine your life just ask yourself, “Do I pray for them? Do I prepare for them? Because what I have found is when there is no prayer and there is inadequate preparation, there will be no power and there will be no profit, meaning there will be no fruit.

¹⁹ Acts 20:19.

²⁰ Romans 9:1.

²¹ Romans 9:1-3.

²² 2 Corinthians 2:4.

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And I might add, if that is you, you either need to repent or you need to step down because what you are doing you are doing in the flesh, not in the Spirit.

You see, it doesn't matter how profound your proclamation. It doesn't matter how erudite your theology. It does not matter how eloquent your delivery. Without love what you do is absolutely meaningless to God. You are doing it in the flesh, not in the power of the Spirit. And you are nothing more than a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. So this is the apostle's point. Without love even the most gifted prophet is worthless. As a person he is a nothing.

Verse two. He goes on and he says, "And if... I know all mysteries and all knowledge."²³

Mysteries refers to divine truth that was hidden in the Old Testament, but now is revealed in the New Testament. There are many examples of that. And in those days gifted men would have taught the truth, for example, the mystery of the incarnation. There would have been the mystery of the gospel, the mystery of the Gentiles that would be fellow heirs of the same body, partakers of the promise of Christ through the gospel like you would read about in Ephesians three. There would be the mystery concerning Christ and the Church in Ephesians five. There would be the mystery of Christ in you, the hope of glory. There would have been the mystery of lawlessness that is already at work in the world that you would read about concerning the antichrist in 2 Thessalonians two. There would have been the mystery that we shall not all sleep, but we will all be changed, 1 Corinthians 15. There is the mystery of Babylon the Great, the great harlot church that will arise before the Lord comes that we read about in Revelation 17 and so forth.

But he is saying here that even if you have this impressive gift, able to edify the saints in such a magnificent way, if you don't have love, you are nothing. You are nothing.

Well, what if I know all mysteries and all knowledge, he says. He is really stretching the limits here of hyperbole. He is saying, "I don't care if you are omniscient, if you know everything or think you do. Without love you are nothing."

1 Corinthians 8:1 we read, "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies."²⁴ You see, the two must coexist together. They must balance each other. One without the other can be very dangerous.

Think about it. A man with knowledge will be arrogant apart from love. But a man who is just filled with love but lacks knowledge will also lack discernment and make himself vulnerable as well as others to believing error.

So be careful here. Paul is not mitigating the importance of knowledge. In fact, in Philippians 1:9 he says, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 8:1.

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excellent.”²⁵ But, again, that knowledge must be guided by a self sacrificing, self humiliating, self controlled love.

But if you have the gift of faith, is love necessary there, too? In the end of verse two he says, “And if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”²⁶

This is not a reference to saving faith, but rather a profound confidence in God that cannot be extinguished regardless of the trial that may come into your life. This is the mustard seed type of faith that Jesus talked about in Matthew 17. You will recall that mustard seed faith is not to be equated with the analogy of the smallness of the seed, but rather its persistence and its power. This is the faith, dear friends, of persistent prayer. This is the kind of faith that unleashed the power of God. This is the type of faith that never doubts, that does not get discouraged. It never gives up, a faith that believes God when everything and everyone else fails. A faith, he says, so as to remove mountains, which would be an exaggerated analogy to describe a faith that trusts God to do the impossible.

But he is saying here even if you have that kind of faith, without love, God is unimpressed. The Spirit is quenched.

And then, as if to address those who now are kind of smugly sitting back and saying, “Well, so far I have not been scathed by any of this denunciation. I don’t deserve that kind of rebuke because of my benevolence.” And others, perhaps because of the martyrdom that they might be considering, Paul then turns to them and says in verse three, “And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor...”²⁷

Isn’t it interesting? He says, “Give all,” not just some, but all. Without love, what does it profit you? Nothing. You see, God is not impressed. There is no reward for that. Many Christians give out of duty rather than desire. They feel obligated to somehow give to God rather than giving out of a heart of love. Such benevolence profits you absolutely nothing. The next time you write a check for the church or to missionaries or give even to the poor, you need to examine your heart. Before you pat yourself on the back and say, “I fulfilled my duty.” No, a heart of love will not think that way.

Beloved, think of it this way. If you are not driven by a passionate love for Christ, a passionate love for the brethren, a passionate love for those that are dying in their sins, you need to put your checkbook away. You see, God doesn’t need your money. He needs your heart. He wants you to love him so much that you give. And when a heart loves in that way, it will give, not out of duty, but out of desire. Because where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

²⁵ Philippians 1:9.

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:2.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:3.

The Greatest Gift – Part 1

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Well, what if I deliver my body to be burned? Surely that would be the ultimate act of self sacrifice. Not if it was done apart from the motivation of love. He says, “If I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.”²⁸

Do you realize that even giving your body to be burned could be an act of selfishness? If you did it in a sense of legalistic fear believing that somehow this is what God would have me to do in order to gain immortality, to gain my salvation...

Down through history there were many who sought martyrdom for these very reasons. Some wanted to be famous like other martyrs. There was a martyr complex that some developed and other did so because they imagined in their mind that doing this would be the ultimate thing and they would receive enormous reward when they entered into heaven. The Corinthians would have also understood this.

In 21 AD about 34 years before Paul penned this letter to the Corinthian believers, Augustus came to Athens which is a town very near Corinth. And while there he received an embassy from India which came via Antioch, history tells us. And in that group was a man named Zamano-chegas who astonished the Athenians by publicly burning himself alive.

The Corinthians would have understood that. It grabbed the attention of all of the world of that day. And there in Athens they built a monument to him that said this, quote, “Zamano-chegas, an Indian from Bargosa, according to the traditional customs of the Indians, made himself immortal and lies here,” end quote.

How sad. Nothing could be further from the truth. How sad to think that he was so self deceived that he left this earth in flames only to enter into the eternal flames of hell. Why? Because he had no love for Christ. He had no love for the lost. He only loved himself. What he did profited him nothing.

Bottom line, folks, without love nothing that we do is of any value. We are just merely noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. As a person you are nothing. You are a spiritual nobody with nothing to contribute, really nothing worthy of any praise.

Without love nothing you do has any value even if you sacrifice your life. But oh, dear friend, please hear me. If you will walk by the Spirit and allow the Spirit of God to produce within you, on the vine of your life, this glorious fruit of love, you will find yourself exalting Christ in magnificent ways. The saints will be edified and sinners will be converted.

So I challenge you as we continue on in our study to examine your heart.

Let's pray together.

²⁸ Ibid.

The Greatest Gift – Part 1

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Father, thank you for these eternal truths. Cause them to bear much fruit in our lives that we might love you as we should and love others for your glory and for our joy. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcript Explanation: Each transcript is a rough approximation of the message preached and may occasionally misstate certain portions of the sermon and even misspell certain words. It should in no way be considered an edited document ready for print. Moreover, as in any transcription of the spoken word, the full intention and passion of the speaker cannot be fully captured and will in no way reflect the same style of a written document.

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