

Wheelerburg Baptist Church 9/8/96 PM
1 Corinthians 13:1-3 "Learning How to Love Biblically"

What would you put in the following blank? What the world needs now is _____. There was a popular song back in the 60's that answered, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's one thing that there's too little of." What was a song in the 60's is a cry in the 90's. The world needs love desperately, and guess where it's turning for help?

The cover story for this week's *U.S. News & World Report* has the picture of a church building with this caption, "The Faith Factor: Can Churches Cure America's Social Ills?" The article points out the startling reality that, after decades of failed government programs, programs which are now being slashed from the budget, the government is now asking churches to do the work in solving America's social problems. The world is turning to the church for help, to find cures for the drug addicted, to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to rehabilitate the criminal, and to lift the poor.

Why are they turning to the church? Because they can't ignore the statistics. The article points out the following: 1) The two most reliable predictors of teenage drug avoidance: *optimism* about the future and regular *church attendance*. 2) The divorce rate for churchgoers is *18 percent*; for those who attend services less than once a year, *34 percent*. 3) Frequent churchgoers are about *50 percent* less likely to report psychological problems and *71 percent* less likely to be alcoholics. (Sept. 9, 1996)

What the world needs now is love. And we have the answer in Jesus Christ.

Yet a real problem is staring us in the face. We are living in a culture at the end of the 20th century that doesn't know what love is, let alone know how to love. What's even worse is that the culture's confusion has spilled into the church. What the church needs now is love, too. And what our families need now is love. The sad fact is many Christians simply don't know how to love biblically.

Thankfully, we can learn to love.

Jay Adams tells the story about a couple who came to him at wit's end. They were ready for divorce, and the only reason they sought him out was to hear his approval. They both shared, "We don't love each other any more," expecting him to reply, "Oh, that's bad. I guess you weren't meant for each other." But the reply they heard caused their jaws to hit the floor, "So you don't love each other, huh? Then you're going to have to *learn* to love each other!"

"Learn to love each other?! You mean you can *learn* to love a person you feel nothing for?" That's right. We can learn to love. Change that--we *must* learn to love. God commands us to do so.

With that as our aim, we are beginning a new series this evening entitled, "Learning How to Love Biblically." God teaches us how to love in His Word, and no place does He do so more powerfully than in what we call "The Love Chapter," 1 Corinthians 13.

Let's take an overview look first, then zero in on the first three verses.

The Context of 1 Corinthians 13

There are few texts in the Bible that have been abused as much as 1 Corinthians 13. It's been said that a text without a context is a prooftext for a pretext. How often have you heard 1 Corinthians 13 wrenched from its context, in weddings and funerals? Is that

why God gave us the "Love Chapter", so we could have sentimental sermons on Christian kindness?

Why did Paul write 1 Corinthians 13? To address a very specific problem. What was it? It's not hard to figure out. 1 Corinthians 13 is sandwiched between two chapters which deal with the subject of spiritual gifts.

The Corinthian church was a problem church, and amongst the problems were these. There were schisms between brothers, immorality, lawsuits between members, abuses in the Communion service, and this one--abuse of spiritual gifts. Put simply--This was a church that needed to learn how to love!

Specifically, the church had made a circus out of service. The members were competing for the showy, spiritual gifts. In chapter 12, Paul reminded them, "But now has God set the members, every one of them, in the body, as it has pleased Him (12:18)." There are no super-saints. We need each other.

Furthermore, there are no super gifts. Each is vital. And each can be abused, too, if the holder does not exercise it in love. That's where chapter 13 fits in.

Overview of 1 Corinthians 13

Structurally, there are three major sections in the chapter, the first dealing with the necessity of love (1-3), the second which gives us a picture of love (4-7), and the final which exalts the permanence of love (8-13). We'll consider the first this evening.

I. The Necessity of Love (1-3)

- A. Without a life of love, spiritual gifts are useless (1-2).
 - 1. If I exercise tongues without love, I'm just making noise (1).
 - 2. If I exercise prophecy, knowledge, and faith without love, I am nothing (2).
- B. Without a life of love, sacrifice profits me nothing (3).
 - 1. If I give to the poor without love, I've given in vain.
 - 2. If I give my life without love, I've given in vain.
- C. To sum it up...
 - 1. Without love, I am nothing.
 - 2. Without love, I gain nothing.

II. The Picture of Love (4-7)

- A. Here's what love *is* (4a).
 - 1. Love is long-suffering.
 - 2. Love is kind.
- B. Here's what love is *not* (4b-6a).
 - 1. It doesn't envy.
 - 2. It doesn't promote itself.
 - 3. It's not proud.
 - 4. It's not rude.
 - 5. It's not self-seeking.
 - 6. It's not easily angered.
 - 7. It doesn't keep a record of wrongs.
 - 8. It doesn't delight in evil.
- C. Here's what love *does* (6b-7).
 - 1. It rejoices in the truth.

2. It always protects.
3. It always trusts.
4. It always hopes.
5. It always perseveres.

III. The Permanence of Love (8-13).

- A. Paul identifies the difference between love and spiritual gifts (8-10).
 1. Love never fails.
 2. Spiritual gifts have a temporal purpose.
- B. Paul illustrates the difference between love and spiritual gifts (11-12).
 1. Consider a child.
 2. Consider a mirror.
- C. Paul insists on the enduring value of love (13).

I. The Necessity of Love (1-3)

Paul highlights love's necessity with a personal analogy (1-3), "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding bronze, or a tinkling cymbal. 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, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing."

Why is it so important that we learn how to love biblically? Paul gave the Corinthians two reasons here, both in response to their abuses.

A. Without a life of love, spiritual gifts are useless (1-2). Beginning in v 1, the apostle uses the first person and expresses a series of hypothetical situations--"If I...if I...if I..." Ironically, in each he puts himself in situations in which the Corinthians prided themselves. He named five spiritual gifts.

The first one, "Though I speak with the tongue of men and of angels." To the Corinthians, tongues-speaking was very important. They considered tongues to be the languages of angels. To them, its presence meant they were spiritual. The Corinthians truly believed they were spiritual because they exercised spiritual gifts.

Were they as spiritual as they thought? What does Paul say? If I--think of it, if Paul himself, Paul the apostle--if I speak in tongues, and have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanking cymbal!

The Corinthians knew what Paul meant. Corinth was full of pagan religious groups. There were worshippers of Dionysus (the god of nature) and Cybele (the goddess of wild animals). In the name of worship, the streets of Corinth resounded with noisy gongs and clashing cymbals designed to invoke the gods and drive away the demons. One commentator makes the point, "They were neither melodious nor capable of producing harmony. Both beat out a heavy monotone and caused as much offense as constantly-barking dogs (Prior, 227-8)."

Have the dogs in your neighborhood ever kept you awake at night? Did you find their howling soothing or annoying? Here's the point of v 1.

1. If I exercise tongues without love, I'm just making noise (1). Notice that love is not a verb here, but a noun. It's something we "have." No, love isn't a spiritual gift. In fact, without it spiritual gifts are useless. What then is *love*? We'll talk about that in a

moment (in fact, it's easier to describe love than define it, which is what Paul does in verses 4-7). Paul continues his support for the necessity of love with more hypothetical situations in v 2.

2. *If I exercise prophecy, knowledge, and faith without love, I am nothing* (2).

Prophecy, knowledge, and faith are three of the spiritual gifts Paul had just mentioned in the last chapter (12:7-10). Prophecy was important gift in the early church, an *upfront* kind of gift. A person with this gift spoke for God to the church. He revealed God's truth to God's people, certainly a noble task. Prior to the completion of the New Testament canon, the prophet engaged in foretelling as well as forth-telling (the gift applies to the latter in our day).

Important, also, was the gift of knowledge--"and if I have all knowledge." A person with this gift is able to detect heresy, to take confusing passages from God's Word and explain them simply.

"And though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains." The gift of faith is a fantastic gift. The person with it is a person who has the ability to take God at His Word when others are shaking in their boots. Because he "sees" what others cannot see, he can obey God in the dark. Even to the point of moving mountains.

Great gifts, yes, but without love, a great big zero.

I remember when living in Grand Rapids, my wife worked in the seminary office while I was a student. I might share with her about a chapel speaker, "Wow, he could really speak!" And she might offer a different perspective, "Well, I didn't hear him speak, but he was rude when he demanded help in the office."

What does God have to say about an eloquent speaker who doesn't exhibit love? What is His assessment of a Sunday School teacher who can answer all the tough questions, but is too wrapped up in his own life to get involved in loving other people? And what about a charter member who had great faith to start a church, but ran off visitor after visitor with an obnoxious attitude?

The answer is startling. Paul says, "If I do *that*, I am nothing." Not, "I accomplished nothing," but I *am* nothing. Wow! Nothing? Nothing!

This is serious! If we could put a person who had gifts without love on God's weighing scales, the tray wouldn't budge. A gifted person without love is absolutely weightless in spiritual value.

Let that sink in, my friend. That means it's possible to obey God, to be involved in ministry, to do right things, to exercise your spiritual gifts, and all for naught. Right now, we can be doing things for God, but to no avail. What's the problem. Love is missing.

Question--What does it mean when it says we must "have love"? Is Paul talking about our motivation, that if I use my spiritual gift, yet am not motivated to do so by a loving heart, my effort is vain? In part, but it's more than that.

The Greek language has several words that come into English with our one word, "love." There's "philos" (brotherly love), "eros" (physical, sensual attraction; erotic), and "storge" (friendship). Then there's a word that is rather rare in the secular Greek literature, and that's the one Paul used here--"agape."

To have agape love is to have the same time of love God demonstrated in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." For Paul, love is not a feeling. Nor is it a motivational factor for behavior. It is behavior (Fee, 628). To love is to act.

Anything short of action is not love at all. So to have love is to act lovingly (Fee, again, p. 631). To act lovingly is to do what Christ did, to seek the benefit of someone else.

Paul proceeds to offer a second reason we need to learn to live a life of love. First, without a life of love, spiritual gifts are useless. Second...

B. Without a life of love, sacrifice profits me nothing (3). Listen carefully to the staggering revelation in v 3 (NIV), "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." In v 3, Paul describes two acts of sacrificial giving, both of which are negated by an absence of agape love.

1. *If I give to the poor without love, I've given in vain.* Did you catch that? I can be a Mother Theresa and still miss it! Don't misunderstand the argument. The act itself isn't wrong. Jesus Himself once told a brash young ruler to sell his goods and give to the poor. The point is that a sacrificial gesture is vain if it's not backed up by a life of love as described in the next four verses.

Paul's addressing a core issue here. In fact, before us is a litmus test for true spirituality. If you think, "I'm a spiritual Christian because I've served in this church for 25 years. I've given sacrificially. I bring a covered dish to every potluck, and I sign up to work at every VBS," hold on. The truth is, if you're not living a life of love, if it's not the pattern of your life to deny yourself so you can benefit others, you're kidding yourself.

It's sad, yet true. There are more than a few things done in churches that look sacrificial yet are the product of pride and not of devotion. In fact, at the end of v 3 we learn it's even possible to give one's life as a martyr for Christ, and to miss it. How?

2. *If I give my life without love, I've given in vain.* Do you find that hard to fathom? A person can surrender his body to the flames for Christ, and lose his gain. Why is that? Because sacrifice profits us nothing without a life of love.

I hope we're catching the sense of the necessity of love. It's mandatory that we learn to love biblically. So let's bring the message of 1 Corinthians 13 a little closer to home.

Remember, the reason Paul spoke of tongues, prophecy, knowledge, and faith here is because those were the gifts the Corinthian Christians were abusing. D. A. Carson says that if Paul were addressing the modern church, he might begin 1 Corinthians 13 this way: "You Christians who prove your spirituality by the amount of theological information you can cram into your heads, I tell you that such knowledge by itself proves nothing. And you who affirm the Spirit's presence in your meetings because there is a certain style of worship (whether formal and stately or exuberant and spontaneous), if your worship patterns are not expressions of love, you are spiritually bankrupt. You who insist that speaking in tongues attests a second work of the Spirit, a baptism of the Spirit, I tell you that if love does not characterize your life, there is not evidence of even a first work of the Spirit."

Paul's not putting down spiritual gifts. He's just emulating love.

C. To sum it up...we can underscore the necessity of love with two affirmations.

1. *Without love, I am nothing.* That's what v 2 says in plain black and white.

2. *Without love, I gain nothing.* That's the undeniable conclusion of v 3.

You say, "Well, if love is so necessary, what exactly is it? Be more specific." We will, next week! That's the issue addressed in verses 4-7.

Taking Inventory: In a moment, I want to help you evaluate your love in light of God's Word. To prepare our hearts for a time of personal inventory, let's sing a song to our Lord asking Him to increase our ability to love.

Hymn of Response: #363 "More Love to Thee"

The hypothetical "ifs" Paul specified in 1 Corinthians 13 were how the Corinthians measured spirituality, "If I speak with tongues, if I have the gift of prophecy, if I have mountain-moving faith...I must be a spiritual giant." They were wrong.

Frankly, we have developed an entirely different set of tests for measuring spirituality in our day. The list is just as dangerous. Let's bow our heads and contemplate our own lives. God's Word says to us:

If I'm an Awana leader, a nursery worker, and have served on the Combined Board, but am not living a life of love, I am nothing.

If I sing in the choir and lead my family in devotions every day, and preach the most inspiring sermons, yet am not laying down my life for others in love, I gain nothing.

If I am a member of a Baptist Church in good standing, bring my King James Version Bible to worship, and drop my tithe in the plate every week, yet fail to act lovingly towards everyone, I am nothing and gain nothing.

Take this opportunity to confess sin, and experience the cleansing of Christ. After a few moments, Emily and Marsha will help us reflect with a ministry in music.

Time for Reflection and Prayer

Ministry in Music: Marsha & Emily Walker

What the world needs now is love. As we sing the following song, let's recommit ourselves to learning to love one another as never before.

Closing Hymn: #284 "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love"

Have you recently told your family members that you love them?