

Sermon 42: 1 Corinthians 13:1-3: The Greatness of Love

OUTLINE

The importance of love
Love and power
Love and sacrifice

INTRODUCTION

‘And the greatest of these is love.’ These are familiar words from 1 Corinthians 13 that tell us that love is supreme. That is a sentiment few would deny. There are many who talk about love, The Beatles’, ‘All you need is love,’ is a catch all phrase for many. But what is love, why do we need love? Just because someone says the word ‘love’ does not mean we are saying the same thing. Think about Whitney Houston’s hit Greatest Love of All, here are some of the lyrics, ‘The greatest love of all Is easy to achieve Learning to love yourself Is the greatest love of all.’ Self-love is her definition of the greatest love. 1 Corinthians 13 is often read at weddings, and rightly so because marital love will be better if it is the love spoken of here. But for many today, all of existence revolves around romantic love. How many books are written, how many movies made, how many songs are sung about being ‘in love’? Many think the great reason for human existence and the great satisfaction of human existence that completes us is romantic love. Loving God, being loved by God, and loving like God are the missing elements in our world’s definition of love. 1 Corinthians 13 is a needed antidote to the self-absorbed definitions of love that we are constantly assaulted with. Positive self-regard is important but we need God to do this in a way that does not lead to idolatry, calling it the greatest love of all is blasphemy. Romantic love is a gift of God intended to portray the gospel, but the self—oriented; lust driven versions we see around us fall short of marriages filled with the love 1 Corinthians 13 is talking about. Things go wrong when self gets in the way and a return to a biblical definition of love becomes necessary.

In the last chapter Paul has been talking about the church as a body, with each member an important part with necessary gifts who are supposed to be an interdependent interconnected whole serving one another with the gifts they have been given. Having given some basic details about the gifts, Paul now picks up the idea he ended the last chapter on, showing them a more excellent way to having gifts. The more excellent way is of course the way of love. Chapter 13 is an important chapter wedged in between chapter 12 which introduces and explains the gifts; and chapter 14 which deals with the nuts and bolts of how to administrate certain gifts. This chapter lies at the heart of the discussion and discusses the matter of heart, love. Today as we begin this chapter we will be looking at verses 1-3, and we want to make three key points, the importance of love; love as greater than power; and love as greater than sacrifice.

The importance of love

To say love is important is a self-evident truth none can deny. But as we drill down into the biblical logic for this we see how important it is and how it is important. The Bible tells us that God is love, 1 John 4:7-8, ‘Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.’⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is

love.' Love does not define God, God defines love. Love did not preexist God and better Him by Him adopting it, He is and always was the fullest perfection of love. Father; Son and Spirit in perfect and contented love. And then He makes us in His image. God made us to know what He enjoys in Himself, that we would be one as He is one. That we would have a creaturely and analogical oneness, where He is one in essence, we would have a creaturely bond and love as close as a finite existence can come to emulating His eternal perfection. We are creatures made to love and be loved, so we seek it, fight for it, die for it, write about it, idolize it like all of God's other good gifts, we crave it. The Bible reveals that we are creatures made to image God's love but because of our fall into sin, we are broken and fail at love. Instead of loving God with all of our heart, soul mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves, we are bent in on ourselves with selfishness/sinfulness tainting all that we do, even in the name of love.

Perhaps you have come here today and you are delighted to hear about this emphasis on love. One of my goals today is to help every single one of us see how loveless we are and to strive for the love Paul is going to portray in this chapter. Those who are perfected in love towards God are those whose whole being is oriented in worship to the One who is worthy of all praise, His glory has captured their hearts; His being and works are the joy of their meditation; He commands are readily and joyfully embraced; holiness is panted after because being more like God is the souls great delight; unceasing gratitude overflows in the heart and spills out in gratitude for all of God's gifts; His word is their greatest treasure; His promises their security; to be a child of God their greatest privilege; there is only trust when they suffer and a quiet and humble resignation to His Fatherly discipline and providences. But our love to God is barely worth the name. That which should be our first love is not; our hearts and minds are given to another; our industry and sacrifice is given to another; our service to Him is carried out with fear; a grudging and complaining attitude; instead of trust there is doubt and criticism; instead of seeking His face we seek worldly distractions. Like a wife who says she loves her husband but gives her heart and body to another, so is our love to God.

And what does perfect love towards others look like? It looks like a humble attitude that treats others as more significant than ourselves free from pride and conceit; it looks like a magnanimous soul that seeks another's good that is not full of envy or jealousy; it is a peacemaker who seeks to see rifts mended who does all and says all to unite not to divide; to build up not to break down. This love deals in truth and not falsehood; it seeks justice for the downtrodden, and mercy for the suffering. It is generous towards the needy; compassionate towards the suffering; forgiving towards those who have wronged them, we need only read the rest of this chapter to see what this looks like. Compare that to our love. Sometimes our parental love is driven by a desire to make our lives easier or to appear like better parents than we are rather than a genuine love for our children. Sometimes our marital love is driven by a fear of being alone, or wanting to avoid the difficulty of starting again with a different person rather than a genuine love for our spouses. Sometimes we only love the church because it is full of our friends, has music and preaching that we like and others think it is better than their church. And on and on we could go.

Have we fallen short of this love in our lives? Have we failed to love the God who made us? Have we failed to love our spouses, our children, our neighbors, our fellow church members, our enemies? This is a serious matter that we must not overlook, Rev. 2:2-5 are words spoken to what we would think is a most excellent

church, the Church in Ephesus but who were failing in love, ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.’ God takes our lovelessness seriously.

But there is good news for us here. Yes we are born selfish and we fail in love, worse we have acted in hate; but God is love and has loved us and not dealt with us as our sins deserve. God has made a way for us to be forgiven, for us to be restored. Jesus has died upon the cross to make a way for us to come back to God, having all our sins forgiven, and more than that, if we repent of our sins and trust in Him He takes us as His child, He fills us with His Spirit, He instructs us with His word, and enables the fruit of the Spirit of love to be produced within us. And if we are believers who have the Spirit within us, even if we have neglected to be loving, love is a fruit of the Spirit. In other words, it can grow. As we quieten the flesh by separating ourselves from distracting activities; as we amputate sins that beset us; as we bring our secret sins into the light through accountability relationships; as we put off the sins that grieve and hinder the Spirit’s work within us; as we go to church to attend the means of grace; as we read the word; as we pray; as we have fellowship; as we meet with Christ in the Lord’s Supper; as we see the beauty of Christ in the gospel, all of this goes to nourish the love that we desire to have in our lives.

Are you pursuing this more excellent way of love? Do you grieve over the lovelessness in your heart towards God, the church, the lost, your neighbor?

Love and power

V1-2, ‘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.’ When we are selfish and loveless things go wrong. We see it everywhere. In Corinth we are seeing worldly attitudes and actions of selfishness afflicting the church and tearing it apart. Their lovelessness has driven them to divisions; to taking each other to court; to misleading young believers around food offered to idols; to abusing the Lord’s Supper by getting drunk and not waiting for those who have less; and Paul is now dealing with the problem of people putting themselves forward, and thinking themselves more important, and putting others down, all around the issue of the spiritual gifts. The sensational nature of the gifts have distracted them from what truly matters and they have mistreated each other with the very gifts God had given them. Paul has given some instruction on the gifts in chapter 12 now he turns to the important matter of love.

Paul’s opening point is that love is greater than any miraculous gift. You will notice that Paul in v1-2 lists a number of the miraculous gifts, tongues, prophecy, and faith. Tongues though usually last in the lists to show that it is not the best gift is now placed in the first position to highlight that it is likely the gift causing the most problems. He takes each of these to the superlative degree indulging in a little hyperbole. For tongues he not only mentions all human languages but

all the languages of angels too. Some have tried to use the tongues of angels as a way of covering over the practiced gibberish that is no known language that is spoken by the majority of modern tongues practitioners as a defense that it is in fact a real language. It is clear that Paul is using hyperbole in all instances. Paul is saying that love is better than being a supernatural omniglot never mind polyglot. Paul exaggerates prophecy which is direct revelation from God to include all mysteries and all knowledge, hyperbolizing it to the point of prophetic omniscience. Paul is not suggesting that some prophets in the NT church may actually have such levels of prophetic insight, but saying that love is greater than if someone had this amount of knowledge. Likewise love is greater than having the gift of all faith to the point of actually being able to move mountains not merely a mountain. The point is simple, love is greater than miraculous power, more important than miraculous power.

Faith working itself out by love is more important than miraculous power. Judas was someone who had power, but not faith working itself out in love. Jesus warns about those who prophesied but whom He did not know. Or think of the time the disciples came back rejoicing because they were able to cast out demons, Luke 10:20, 'Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.' Which is greater, to be a Christian, who has a new heart and the Spirit within enabling a true love to God and neighbor; or to have the power to order satan around? In this sense love as the fruit of faith of salvation is greater.

Paul compares loveless tongues to a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Some have suggested that these are the instruments used by idolatrous cults in Corinth as part of their worship of idols, and by this comparison Paul is saying your loveless use of miraculous signs is as good as idol worship. A strong sentiment indeed. Others have taken it to be a harmful and alienating clamour. Either way it is destructive. Look at the repeat of Paul, tongues without love does no good; prophecy and faith without love 'I am nothing;' sacrifice and martyrdom without love, 'I gain nothing.' Does nothing, am nothing, gain nothing, that is the fruit of loveless activity.

I have been reading Jonathan Edwards, Charity and its Fruits in preparation for this sermon and I would like to share with you some of his ideas on this point of love superior to power. He highlights that the ordinary working of the Spirit in producing salvation and Christian growth in love is better than the extraordinary working of miracles. This is a needed emphasis at a time in the church when many are wrong headedly pursuing the miraculous. He reminds us that God communicates more of Himself in salvation which eventuates in love than in miraculous power. In salvation He gives Himself to us, in miracles He gives us His gifts. He also points out that the miracles like prophecy are all in service of the gospel which saves people and changes them to produce love. The miraculous gifts are not the end but a means to the end of salvation. Love, the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of salvation and the grace of God in the heart is of higher importance than any great act. Edwards uses one striking example. Which is greater for Mary, for her to bear the God-man in her body; or for her to have the God-man abide in her heart? If she had born the God-man and had not experienced the grace of God in her heart it would have benefitted her nothing. The love that is greater than miracles should not be reduced to a hallmark card where someone might say I would rather have love than money, reducing love to romance. Paul is saying something more than that, the love spoken of here is the love that is a fruit of the Spirit. This is a love only Christians can manifest, a

love by which the world knows that we are His disciples, a love John tells us that makes the invisible God visible, 1 John 4:12, 'No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.'

How does this apply? One deed done in love is greater than some spectacular miracle. It is more pleasing to God. One act of kindness, one instance of sacrificial giving, one small act of genuine love is better than a powerful miracle. We cannot all do miracles, but we can all love one another. In talking about spiritual gifts and who has what gift we can get hung up on what gifts we do or do not have. Remember this, love is greater than miracles, give them love. Every believer can exercise this fruit of grace, every believer is equipped to serve in the best way.

Love and sacrifice

V3, 'If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.' Paul exceeds the miraculous power gifts and now mentions extreme acts of service. He lists two examples, first he tells us that love is greater than giving away all your possessions to the poor. Secondly he tells us that love is greater than dying a martyrs death by being burned alive. Here we can feel Paul upping the ante, going deeper into the importance of love not only above miracles but even above extreme religious acts of service. There are several points that we can take from what Paul is saying. Firstly, Paul reminds us that true religion consists in an agreement of the inward and the outward, heart and action. Hypocrisy is when we do one with and feel another, to do an act that has the appearance of love but does not have a heart of love in it. Ps. 51:6 teaches that God desires truth in the inward parts. One of the beatitudes is blessed are the pure in heart. One of Jesus great criticism of the Pharisees was that they were white washed tombs with a showing of religion on the outside but loveless and lifeless on the inside. How much of our Christianity is heartless? Loveless prayer, loveless praise, loveless giving, loveless ministry, loveless attendance?

If we try to penetrate the reason why lovelessness towards God and neighbor is a sin, the sin is not merely failing to live an authentic life, or succumbing to distractions. No, the truth of who God is is more than enough to draw out all the love of our hearts. Lovelessness resembles atheism in that we do not admit the truth of God but live like He is not. To know God is to love Him. He is perfect in His being. He is perfect in His actions. But more than that He has loved us who deserve punishment. He has given His Son to die and pay for our sins. He has saved us with a salvation so rich, so free, so eternal that dwelling on any single aspect of what He has done would be enough to fuel eternal praise. And as we consider our duty to love others. How can we not love those that God loves? How can we not want to share this love with others? When our hearts are so full of joy, our future's so secure and full of promise, when all of the things that have made our lives miserable and been defeated how can we not have an impulse to want to speak, and share, and endure whatever difficulty comes our way so that others might know what we know. What is the giving away of our goods, of our time, of our labor when we are richer by what God has given, when we can never out give Him, when He returns 100 fold of all we give? Which is greater, your sin against God, or others sin against you? And yet God has forgiven your sins, what sin can we not be willing to forgive another? When Paul summarizes Christianity he calls it faith working itself out by love, because love is the inevitable fruit of faith. Is your faith producing this love?

Secondly, we learn that no one can save themselves by their deeds. Here are extreme acts of poverty and martyrdom, and without love they gain nothing. Here we need to see that there is nothing that you can do to impress God. Your very best deeds cannot earn your way into His good graces or buy salvation. The only way that a sinner can find acceptance with God is if we will repent of our sins and put our trust in Christ.

Thirdly, we learn that God is not interested in sacrifice and suffering for its own sake. God wants you to love Him, not to believe that He is bloodthirsty or cruel who will only be satisfied by a self-afflicting obedience. God is interested in the love of our hearts because this is a true giving of ourselves not merely empty and grand gestures of sacrifice. Are you giving yourself in service to others or are you just throwing money at the problem, love gives itself. True love is willing to make sacrifices but we learn from this that it is possible to have all sorts of religious zeal and sacrifice that are not driven by a saving faith or true love. Paul was a Pharisee who was accustomed to austere measures but had no love in his heart. Paul condemns loveless legalism.

All of what God has done has been in love. When He covenanted in love to save a people before the foundation of the world, the love of God between Father, Son and Spirit drove it. When God elected us for salvation, it was in love. When God created it was in love. When God did not destroy sinful humanity but promised a Savior it was in love. When God patiently endured the long history of human sinfulness without eradicating it, this was from love. When God sent Jesus to be born of a woman, to live a perfect life and die a perfect death to make a sinful people righteous, this was because of His love. As He patiently endures the rejection of the offer of free salvation secured by the most costly payment of Christ dying on the cross, this is because of love. As He pours out mini judgements seeking to wake people up to the truth that they might call upon Him this is love. When He returns one day to take His bride to Himself, this will be because of His eternal love. And even as the Son judges, the devil, death and all those who rejected God, the Son because of His love for the Father will act with perfect justice. God is love, acts in love and so we must love one another.