

## **FIRST CORINTHIANS**

### **The Preeminence Of Love I Corinthians 13:1-3**

Have you ever known a Christian minister who could preach eloquent sermons but when out of the pulpit was harsh and cold with people? Have you known great Christian teachers who seemed unconcerned and uncaring when dealing with people on a one to one basis? Have you known Christians who have tremendous gifts of service and hospitality but tend to be very critical individuals? Have you known Christians who have a phenomenal ability to give money to the Lord's work but who fail miserably at interpersonal relationships? What is the problem? It is the gap which exists between the use of one's spiritual gift and his or her inability to manifest genuine love. Love is the key which opens up the effective use of spiritual gifts. This is what I Corinthians 13 is all about--the place of love in relation to spiritual gifts.

By anyone's standard, saved or unsaved, I Corinthians 13 is a literary masterpiece. It is the most beautiful chapter in the whole Bible. In it there is majestic language, lofty idealism and practical advice. As one scholar said, "This chapter is the greatest, strongest and deepest thing that Paul ever wrote." Paul is often pictured as merely a writer of keen intelligence and relentless logic, severe, cold, unfeeling and austere. But this chapter shows us that he was a man of deep emotion, true sentiment, a man of passion, tenderness, sensitivity and tears. It gives us an insight into Paul that we might not pick up in the other epistles. This chapter appears to be a song or hymn or lyric, and Paul seems to break out in intense emotion to praise his God.

First Corinthians 13 is often taken out of the context of the epistle in which it is found. Chapters 12-14 of I Corinthians is dealing with the subject of spiritual gifts, or to be more accurate, the excesses in spiritual gifts, for the Corinthians were exalting the spectacular gift of tongues above the other spiritual gifts, thinking that those who spoke in tongues were somehow more spiritual than those who did not. In Chapter 12, Paul showed that the gift of tongues was the least of all the gifts, and other gifts were to be sought before seeking tongues. He ended the chapter by saying, "And now I will show you the most excellent way." Chapter 13 is a parenthesis between the preceding and following chapters. Paul stops to show these Corinthians a more excellent way than spiritual gifts. The way of love is to be preferred above the way of spiritual gifts. Paul is speaking about two different ways of approaching life. The Christian is not to do away with spiritual gifts, and he is not to make the aim of his life the seeking and using of spiritual gifts but he is to make his aim love. Love is something every Christian can manifest, but gifts differ in kind, value and degree. Spiritual gifts are important to the proper functioning of the church, and if we do not exercise our spiritual gifts we can subtly sabotage the program of God from a human perspective. But love is far more important, for love is the greatest force in the universe; it is a spiritual grace that every Christian can produce in his or her life by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Obviously, the central theme of I Corinthians 13 is love. The Greek word for love here is agape. It is not a sensual love or even a love of affection, friendship or warm fuzzy love. Agape love is primarily a love of commitment or decision of the will which leads to sacrifice of self for another. It is a love response to someone who is unworthy of the love. Agape love is derived from the work of Christ on the cross -- God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son for it. He loved the sinner when the sinner was unlovely. God's response to sinful men who were His enemies was love--agape. This love involves feelings but it is not primarily based on feelings. This is a love which reaches out and lavishes blessings on those who are unworthy of them. It is a love which proceeds from the nature of the lover rather than the worth of the person who is loved. It is a love which gives, which seeks not its own, but the good and the best for the person loved. Agape is a love of commitment, of decision to treat another person with concern, care and thoughtfulness. It is a giving love, not a taking love.

John Oxenham gives this definition: "Love ever lives and ever stands with open hands and while it lives, it gives, for this is love's prerogative to give and give and give."

#### LOVE IS PREEMINENT TO THE GIFT OF TONGUES 13:1

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels. What Paul does in this chapter is set forth a hypothetical case. The Greek should literally read, "Suppose I speak with the tongues of men and angels." He imagines an extraordinary man with a remarkable, brilliant life but who lacks one characteristic--love. This man with great communication skills, who has all knowledge and understands all mysteries is only imaginary. He is a hypothetical person Paul has set up to prove one point. If a person has all the spiritual gifts and does not have love, in reality he has nothing.

This man has the gift of tongues to the maximum. He speaks in every conceivable language and dialect and has the greatest prayer language and in so doing is charismatically eloquent. The Corinthians were abusing the gift of tongues. They thought to have this spectacular gift made them more spiritual, more important to the body of Christ, and more prominent among God's people. They were filled with pride about the least of all the spiritual gifts.

Not only did this hypothetical man speak in all known human languages but he also spoke in the known language of the angels. Whether the tongue of angels is a cognitive language or a prayer language really doesn't matter. Remember, this example is hypothetical. What Paul is acknowledging is that angels do have a language and this imaginary man had the ability to speak all languages, both human and angelic. He could supernaturally speak not only the four thousand languages and dialects in the world but also the known language of angels, for obviously angels, like men, have a need to communicate. The man was a rare critter.

But have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. This man was apparently rhetorically eloquent and could hypnotize men with the magic of his words, but he lacked the most important element of life -- love. Even though he could stir emotions and arouse enthusiasm with his eloquence, he did not have love and so was just a big noise maker, the noisy gong and the clanging cymbal were not unfamiliar sounds to the Corinthians, for it was through these instruments that they previously had worshiped their pagan gods in the temples. These instruments made empty sounds to gods who did not exist. This hypothetical man, with his great gifts of communication but

no love, was like the clanging of metal which produces a loud but harsh, dull, hollow sound. The point is obvious: The best speech of heaven and earth, without love, is but a noise. Communication without love is a useless thing. The most gifted Christian who does not have love gives forth a hollow, empty, meaningless noise and ultimately no one will pay attention to his or her spiritual gift.

#### LOVE IS PREEMINENT TO THE GIFT OF PROPHECY 13:2a

If I have the gift of prophecy. The hypothetical man has the gift of prophecy to the maximum. There is no limit to his grasp of knowledge.

And can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge. This man has the spiritual gifts of prophecy and knowledge to the greatest possible degree and understands all divine and human knowledge. He grasps all scientific and philosophical truth, and above that, he knows all divine truth. He understands all spiritual mysteries, knows every facet of God's will and enters into the infinite counsel of God, but he lacks love.

What is Paul saying? It is possible to be a great prophet and not have love. It is possible to be a man of fantastic knowledge and not have love. A loveless prophecy must be condemned, and a loveless knowledge must be spurned. Even if some people seem to be able to unscrew the inscrutable and answer all biblical paradoxes and mysteries, they are nothing if they do not display and manifest love.

#### LOVE IS PREEMINENT TO THE GIFT OF FAITH 13:2b

And if I have a faith that can move mountains. This person possessed the gift of faith to the maximum, so as to accomplish great miracles. It is possible to have the gift of faith and exercise it mightily and still be lacking in love.

But have not love, I am nothing. This man is the epitome of a spiritually gifted person, endowed beyond measure with gifts, yet before God he is nothing because there is no love. He is a zero without love. What good is it to speak in four thousand languages, have the most fantastic prayer language, spit out prophecy par excellence, display great knowledge of the Bible and secular subjects, exercise faith so as to do miraculous things, if we have a critical, negative, and cantankerous spirit? It is possible to be a cold-blooded prophet, a heartless teacher, a critical person who speaks in tongues and even a great man of faith who has a harsh spirit, Paul says all of our gifts are worthless, nothing, zeros, without love gracing our Christian character. Great spiritual gifts do not make great Christians but great exercise of love makes great Christians. Therefore, all Christians can be great in God's eyes when they are exercising love.

#### LOVE IS PREEMINENT TO THE GIFT OF GIVING 13:3a

If I give all I possess to the poor. If this hypothetical person was the most benevolent of all men, the finest philanthropist of all time, and yet did not have love, he was nothing. The Greek aorist tense indicates that with one sweeping magnanimous gesture this man gave away every single penny he had to help the needy and poor. He was dedicated to wiping out poverty, but he was not motivated by love. It is possible for people to give great sums of money to charitable and religious organizations and do it

with selfish motives. They may give to merit favor from God or to gain the applause of men. One may be a big giver of money but without love it profits nothing. Though a man give everything for the cause of Christ, for missionary work, for the church, if he has no love he is not the gainer but the loser.

A Christian may be exercising the spiritual gift of giving and still do it without love. Great spiritual gifts can operate apart from love. Yet, without love, we are nothing before a holy God.

#### LOVE IS PREEMINENT TO THE GIFT OF MERCY 13:3b

And surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. A person with the gift of mercy is a giver of himself to others, and the hypothetical man possessed this gift to the extent of giving up his life. Martyrdom was welcomed by him. He would be willing to be burned, or run through by a sword, or put on the torture rack, or linger on a cruel cross, or rot away in a rat infested dungeon. Yet it is possible to do all these without love. A man might die a martyr's death for selfish reasons, pride, or political beliefs, but not have love. It is not uncommon for us to read of some person today who pours gasoline on himself or herself and makes a flaming human torch. Why? Who knows, but without love, even martyrdom profits nothing before God.

Martyrdom done out of love for Christ does gain the favor of God if God calls the Christian to make the ultimate sacrifice. It was not uncommon in New Testament times for pagans to set themselves on fire out of commitment to their gods. There were a few Christians who did the same things to show they had as much commitment for Jesus Christ as the pagans had for their false gods. Yet, even that sacrifice if not done out of love is worthless. Only God knows the human heart.

What Paul is saying is that if we make the supreme sacrifice of life itself and have not learned love, we gain nothing. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, it will be regarded as nothing. God has set us Christians on this earth to learn to love, and to live without learning to love is to have wasted our time while on planet earth no matter how impressive our achievements in other ways might be. Love is more important even than martyrdom.

#### CONCLUSION

What lessons are we Christians to learn from this portion of Scripture? 1) Love, in God's estimation, is the bottom line. If we have love, we have everything. If we do not have love, we have nothing; 2) Any spiritual gift we may have, even if we have it to the maximum, is not as important as showing love. Love takes precedence over spiritual gifts 3) Love is the key to humbling the Christian who has great spiritual gifts and exalting the Christian who has lesser spiritual gifts: 4) Love is the motive that God expects from us when we are doing service for our Lord. It is love which gives every deed and every act we do value. Humans look on the outward man but God looks on the heart, and a heart without love does not impress Him one whit; 5) This kind of love is a supernatural love that can only be produced by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian, for the Bible says. "... God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Rom. 5:5).

How can we get this love? It comes as an outgrowth of our daily faith in Jesus Christ. It is Christ through the Holy Spirit who gives us power to love. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love (Gal. 5:6). Trust Christ to grant you power through the Holy Spirit to overcome personal bitterness, hurts and scars which you have in your heart towards those who have mistreated you. Trust Christ to grant you power through the Holy Spirit to love those who are of a different race, culture or economic status, those who do not look like, act like, dress like or smell like you. If Christ is going to love through you, you must be willing to step out in faith, risking your pride, your reputation, your selfishness, as Christ begins to change you, giving you a new heart, a new attitude and a new view of others. To love as Christ loves, you must sacrifice yourself to God and for others. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love (Gal. 5:6).

Love is difficult to define, but some twentieth century writer asked the question "What is love?" and the answer given was:

"It's SILENCE when your words would hurt.  
It's PATIENCE when your neighbor's curt.  
It's DEAFNESS when the scandal flows.  
It's THOUGHTFULNESS for another's woes.  
It's PROMPTNESS when stern duty calls.  
It's COURAGE when misfortune falls."

If you are without Christ, you need to clearly understand that God is love and He demonstrated His love for sinful men at the cross where Christ died for sinful men and women. God promises eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, entrance into heaven and a divine purpose for living to all who receive Christ as Savior and Lord. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn. 3:16). The key is found in the words "whoever believes in Him." Have you believed in Christ? Have you accepted Him? When you do, you will be saved, the Holy Spirit will take up residence in you, and you will be given the capacity and ability to love others as Christ loved you at the cross.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, If you love one another (Jn. 13:34-35).