

The Better Way, the Only Way I Corinthians 13:1-13

preached @ Hawkwood Baptist Church
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May 28, 2017

There's been a major brouhaha around the world over one little thing U. S. President Donald Trump did this past week while in Europe. Many world leaders had come to the NATO headquarters for the formal opening of its new headquarters, but when they gathered for a group photo, there was Donald shoving past the prime minister of Montenegro in order to get to the front.

Why would everyone be talking about this? Because it was a naked display of childishness and pride, and there is an inborn awareness in most people that this is improper behaviour. It would have been far better for Trump if he had quietly bribed the photographer so he could meekly stand in the back, then get called to the front. To paraphrase George Burns, the secret to political success is humility, and when you can fake that, you've got it made.

But this was the exact problem Paul was facing at Corinth. It seems as if every member of the church was displaying unashamed immaturity. They boasted about their spiritual wisdom, each trying to appear wiser than the rest. They boasted about their connections with important people—Paul, Peter, Apollos, Christ! They were filled with envy and constant strife over who was the greatest coloured all their relationships..

“For since there is envy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and living like unbelievers? For whenever someone says, ‘I’m with Paul,’ and another ‘I’m with Apollos,’ are you not unspiritual people?” (I Cor. 3:3-4).

In chapter 6 we learn the Corinthian Christians were suing one another over imagined slights, and by chapter 12 we discover they had even turned the use of spiritual gifts into a contest. These gifts were given them by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of ministering to one another and building up the body of Christ. But for these immature Corinthians, it wasn't enough just to have the gift of wisdom, each needed to prove to the church that he had more wisdom than anyone else. It wasn't enough to be able to prophecy; each prophet felt the need to out-prophecy all the other prophets, and every tongues speaker wanted to prove they were better than all the rest, that they could do it faster, or do it with a greater variety of sounds, or something.

This attitude is called operating in the flesh, and it is the way the world thinks about everything. We love competition; whatever men do, we will find a way to turn it into a competition. This is a major car racing weekend, what with the Indianapolis 500 and the Monaco Grand Prix both happening today. That means a huge portion of the world will watch to see who can drive the fastest, and if you are into team sports, then if your favourite team is playing overseas and it's the middle of the night, you'll get up to cheer them on, and if your team wins, then you feel like a winner too.

Forbes and Fortune may be excellent business magazines, but in each case their major claim to fame has nothing to do with excellence in business reporting. Rather, people mostly know about Forbes because it annually lists the 400 richest people in the U. S. and they know about Fortune because of its listing of the 500 largest corporations in the U. S.

So as I said, it is very much the nature of the flesh to want to be the best, or if that isn't possible, to be connected with the best. We forget that we are miserable sinners, and that we are saved only because of God's undeserved grace. It escapes our attention that it is by grace alone that we are given the Holy Spirit as a permanent heart resident. And nor do we remember that we are given spiritual gifts for the purpose of serving others, not for building up ourselves. That's why Paul inserts a chapter on love in the middle of a discourse on spiritual gifts. He does it to make the point that without God's love in us and flowing through us in lives of ministry to others, all our spiritual attainments are useless. Listen, now, to Paul's great hymn to love.

Today's text

I Corinthians 12:31 But desire the greater gifts. And I will show you an even better way (to prove your real spirituality).

I Corinthians 13:1 If I speak human or angelic languages but do not have love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 And if I donate all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not conceited, 5 does not act improperly (here Paul uses a word that refers to shameful behaviour with sexual overtones, what elsewhere he calls defrauding another—see I Thess. 4:1-8), is not selfish, is not provoked, and does not keep a record of wrongs. 6 Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for languages, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. 10 But when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things. 12 For now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known. 13 Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

The text unpacked

v. 1 Love = *agapé*, found throughout the New Testament, but a relatively new word for a new quality of love. The world of Paul's day was familiar with such things as *eros* (romantic, sexual), *Phileo* (friendship), *Storge* (Parents toward children), patriotism (love of country or tribe), and so forth. But the kind of love God displayed through Christ was, prior to His coming into the world, a largely unknown quality. Thus this new kind of sacrificial, self-giving, entirely unselfish love required a new word—*agapé*. “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (I John 4:10).

God help us to see that nowhere else on earth, or even in the imagination of man, is there any love like God's love, no love like Christ's love, no love like the love He displayed on the cross.

Where do you think you could find such love? Amongst the Greek gods? The Norse Gods? The gods of India or China? Just to look at their representative idols is to understand immediately that they have nothing to do with love. Do we find a divine quality of love in the lives of Mohammad or Joseph Smith? Are there any great philosophers, or great world leaders who can love, or inspire love like Jesus?

Think of the great materialists, socialists and communists of the 19th and 20th centuries, Darwin, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Fidel Castro, or Castro's executioner, the inexplicably popular Che Guevara. Not only did these men fail to love like Christ, they spent their lives actively promoting hatred and strife; they were personally responsible for millions of cruel and needless deaths in their lifetimes, and collectively responsible for hundreds of millions of deaths.

Btw, don't fail to note that the first man in this list is Darwin. There could have been no Marx, Lenin, Stalin or the rest without Darwin. He's the man who gave the world an alternative explanation for the creation and development of living things, one that did not require God. He's the one who enabled man to make a religion of science and thereby replace the worship of the living God. Do you know the saddest thing about Darwin? Not that his science was so miserably wrong, although it was, but that by reducing the cosmos to nothing but matter and energy he stripped away the possibility of universal and personal love.

No love, no point to life

v. 1-3 In these first three verses Paul raises a vitally important question about life. Essentially he is asking, what is the point of existence if you do not personally know and experience the love of God flowing into you, and through you, as you relate to others and to God?

1. What is the point of having great communication skills if you do not communicate love?
(v.1)
2. What is the point of great knowledge or great power if you have no love or appreciation either for the creator God, or for the people He created to enjoy these things?
3. What is the point of great generosity or great sacrifice if these things are not motivated by love? Is this not another form of our Lord's searching question, "What does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36)

No love, no personal growth

There is one more thing we need to see in these first three verses. Paul is appealing to the Corinthians' deepest personal interests here. In other words, he's suggesting there is for the Christian a kind of sanctified self-interest that we ignore at our peril. We should read verse one and say to ourselves, "I do not want my speech to be meaningless mere noise. I want it to matter." These verses ought to inspire us to pray, "Lord, may my communications, but especially my gospel communications, be gracious and salty (tasty, attractive, inspiring); help me to know how to answer each person who inquires about my hope in Christ!"

In the same way we should read verse two and realize that we do not want to be nothing, but

rather something in Christ's Kingdom. And notice that in verse three, Paul is concerned that we live our lives in love in order to gain something! What is the thing we're supposed to gain? The answer is simple—Christlikeness, godliness. On the judgment day we will want to stand before God and be able to show how we learned to live in the love of God so as to be shaped into Christlikeness by the indwelling Spirit's transforming work.

Love is a verb (v.4-7)

In these verse Paul spends time describing what love is and what love is not, and about this I want to say a couple of things. (1) These verses are very clear. With the exception noted above at the beginning of verse 5, they do not need explanation so much as they need application in our lives. But the other thing you should note is that Paul uses action words to describe love. Here's a grammatical principle you may have forgotten; nouns are described by other nouns and adjectives, but verbs are described by other verbs and adverbs.

Tree is a noun: a woody perennial *plant*, typically having a single *stem* or *trunk* growing to a considerable *height* and bearing lateral *branches* at some distance from the ground.

But love is a verb. (defined by action words)

Things love does not do — 5 does not act improperly, is not selfish, is not provoked, and does not keep a record of wrongs. 6 Love finds no joy in unrighteousness

Things love does — rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. One could argue that the spiritual gifts must be God's love at work or they are not spiritual gifts.

Compare Galatians 5:22-23 with I Cor. 13:4-7. In other words, if you want people to believe that you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then you need to love them, not impress them with your spiritual giftedness.

Conclusion

I want to end with a quote from A. T. Robertson. "Intellect was worshipped in Greece, and power in Rome; but where did St. Paul learn the surpassing beauty of love? Whether Paul had ever seen Jesus in the flesh, he knows him in the Spirit. One can substitute Jesus for love all through (I Cor. 13).

To know Jesus is to know love

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| 1. Unique, incomparable love | |
| 2. Divine love, infinite, unstoppable love | These loves are all sourced in Him, personified in Him, defined by Him, lived out by Him, transferred from Him to us by faith. |
| 3. Personal love | |
| 4. unmerited love | |
| 5. Saving love | |
| 6. Sacrificial love | |
| 7. Generous love | |
| 8. Purposeful love | |