

## THE PRIORITY OF LOVE

### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3

In our culture, we typically measure success in relation to performance. A successful person, we say, is one who performs well. A *really* successful person is one whose performance is extraordinary, or at least better than everyone else's. And we reward people accordingly.

Think about it. Salaries, bonuses, promotions, positions, praise, almost without exception, are based on how *well* one performs. It's true in sports, politics, and the entertainment industry. It's true in business and sales and academics; it's true of just about everything in our society.

So we have been conditioned to think that if you want to be successful you must give a good performance. You must be able to say the right things, and say them well; you must be able to *do* certain things, and do them impressively; you must possess exceptional abilities and skills, and use them in a way that brings attention to yourself. Because if you are not recognized for what you say or do, you won't be rewarded for it.

That's our culture. That's our system. That's the way we typically define and measure success.

But that is *not* the way God defines and measures success. And if it's not the way God defines and measures success then what we call success may not, in fact, be *real* success. Because only God's definition and only God's standard really matters.

The Apostle Paul wrote to a church that measured *spiritual* success by performance. In particular, it was a church that awarded spiritual status on the basis of the kinds of spiritual gifts people had and how impressively those gifts were exercised in the church. What is more, they arbitrarily assigned a certain amount of spiritual value to each gift and categorized them in such a way that those who possessed the more "valuable" gifts were considered more spiritual and more important than others who had gifts that were not as dramatic.

And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, "That's ridiculous! Spirituality has nothing whatsoever to do with the kind of gift you have. Gifts are given and distributed by God accordingly to *His* will so that *His* purposes can be accomplished. And *all* gifts are important, *all* gifts are necessary so that the Body of Christ can function in the manner that Jesus, the Head of the Body, wants it to function."

So spiritual gifts are good. They are from God. We ought to celebrate them and be thankful for them and use them in the way He has designed. But there is something far more important than gifts, and something that *must* accompany the use of those gifts if they are to be effective or meaningful. Paul talks about this in the first three verses of chapter 13.

**Verses 1-13.** *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."*

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

<sup>8</sup> *Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.* <sup>9</sup> *For we know in part and we prophesy in part,* <sup>10</sup> *but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.* <sup>11</sup> *When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.* <sup>12</sup> *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

<sup>13</sup> *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

(We're going to spend the next five weeks, Lord willing, exploring this rich passage of Scripture. I want to encourage you to memorize it. That would be an investment of time and effort that would serve you well for a lifetime.)

Most of you know that 1 Corinthians 13 is often called “the love chapter.” You’ve no doubt heard it quoted at weddings or seen it printed on greeting cards or posted on refrigerators. That’s appropriate, for this passage is widely regarded as the most beautiful and profound description of love that has ever been written.

But it’s important to know that 1 Corinthians 13 is the centerpiece of Paul’s discussion about *spiritual gifts*. Paul begins that discussion in chapter 12, and concludes it in chapter 14, but chapter 13 is part of the whole and must be understood in that context if we are to appreciate its full significance.

In a church that was attempting to measure spirituality by the kind of gifts they had; in a church where individuals were using spiritual gifts to gain status and leverage in the church, in a church that was discriminating against people who didn’t possess the kinds of gifts that were thought to be important, Paul wants to underscore that spiritual gifts, if they are not motivated by love and exercised in love, are worthless.

It is *love* that gives value and substance to spiritual gifts. It is love that makes spiritual gifts truly effective.

In verses 1-3 Paul uses a figure of speech called *hyperbole*. Hyperbole is intentional exaggeration in order to make a point. The Bible uses hyperbole all the time. We do, too. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a kid in this room right now who sometime in the last few minutes turned to his mother and said, “I’m starving!” And I doubt if that mother was alarmed or concerned at all. Because he’s not *really* starving, he’s exaggerating to make a point. That’s hyperbole.

Paul is exaggerating in these verses—he’s using extreme examples to make a point, but it is a point to be taken very seriously.

He begins by saying, **verse 1**. *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”*

This is the first of four hypothetical situations. Notice the word “if”. Notice also that Paul speaks in the first person, “if I...” Paul wants to make it clear that what he says about spiritual gifts and love applies to himself as much as anybody.

He talks about the tongues of men and of angels. There’s been much discussion and debate about what Paul meant by the tongues of men and, especially, the tongues of angels.

In light of the context of 1 Corinthians it is likely that “tongues of men” refers to the gift of teaching—the ability to effectively explain and expound the Scriptures. The Corinthians had benefitted from several teachers who had this gift—Peter, Paul, Apollos, Timothy. It is also apparent that, in keeping with Greek culture at that time, the church placed a high value on eloquence. They were enamored by eloquence and were critical of those, like Paul, whom

they considered *not* to be eloquent.

The tongues of angels is most likely a reference to the gift of tongues, the God given ability to speak in another language the speaker has not learned and doesn't even understand him/herself. Evidently *tongues* was the gift that was esteemed most highly in the church at Corinth *and* thought to be the most spiritual of all gifts. It was also sought after more than any other gift because if there was a gift that gave the distinct *impression* of spirituality it was tongues. After all, it was spontaneous, it was visible, and it was dramatic.

But Paul wants to make it clear that it is not the gift itself that makes one spiritual, it is how and why the gift is used that is of supreme importance. Are the gifts of teaching and tongues good? Yes. Are they important? Yes. If God gave them then they must be. Are they beneficial? *That depends*. They certainly *can* be. But only...*only* if they are exercised in love.

Paul says in no uncertain terms that if these gifts are not motivated by love and exercised in love, they have no meaning. He compares them to “a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”

You've heard a gong and a cymbal. What makes them different than a piano? Gongs and cymbals are instruments that do not make real music by themselves. Without the accompaniment of other instruments they simply make noise.

Paul is saying that it is possible to have every conceivable linguistic ability on earth and in heaven, known and unknown, but if you do not have love, it's just meaningless noise. It is possible to be the quintessential communicator, to be so eloquent that people are awed by what comes out of your mouth, but if you are lacking in love it is only a hollow reverberation.

If love does not accompany the use of these gifts, they are nothing more than an empty performance. If they are to be useful and beneficial, if they are to accomplish what God wants then they must be motivated by love and exercised *in* love.

Paul goes on in **verse 2** to give his second and third hypothetical scenarios. <sup>2</sup> *If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*

Remember Paul is using *hyperbole*. He is taking us to the limits of our imaginations about the gifts of prophecy and faith. Prophecy, in its most basic sense, is the ability to discern God's mind and communicate it to others. Now, obviously no one knows the *whole* mind of God. That would be impossible. Even the most astute and devout prophets only know a small portion of God's mind—whatever God has chosen to reveal to them.

But for the sake of argument Paul is describing someone who has the gift of prophecy to the extent that there are no limitations to his/her knowledge. He is saying “What if I was so tuned to the frequency of heaven that I completely understood God's mind? What if I had all God's plans and purposes figured out? What if there was nothing I did not comprehend or understand, including the most perplexing theological conundrums known to man? ‘Election? No problem. The Trinity? You bet. The problem of evil? Sit down and let me explain.’”

If it were possible to know such a person or to have such a person in our church you would think, would you not, that he/she would be the *most* effective, *most* helpful, *most* beneficial member?

Paul says, “Not necessarily. It all depends on whether he/she possesses love. If love does not accompany the use of this gift, it is nothing more than an empty performance.”

Then Paul goes on to describe someone with the gift of faith. He says, “What if I had such faith that I could say to this mountain, ‘Move over there!’, and it actually moved...over there? What if I were a person who had such conviction about the power of God and the willingness of God that when I asked Him to do something I had not the slightest doubt that He would do it? What if the word ‘impossible’ wasn’t even in my vocabulary because I believed God to do everything I asked?”

If it were possible to know such a person or to have such a person in our church how valuable, how beneficial, how effective do you think that gift of faith would be?

Paul says, “It all depends on whether he/she possesses love.” If love does not accompany the use of this gift, it is meaningless. He says at the end of verse 2, “*...if I have not love, I am nothing.*”

Incidentally, that’s an even stronger statement than what he says in verse 1. There he said that the result of my gift is meaningless noise. Here he says “I am nothing.” Not that I am worthless, but my ministry is worthless. It has no value. It doesn’t just have *less* value, or even just a little value. It has *no* value. Zero.

Paul continues in **verse 3**. *<sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*”

Paul is talking about extreme sacrifice—extreme *personal* sacrifice. Here’s a person who, hypothetically, gives away his possessions to the poor—and not just a portion or a percentage of them. Jewish rabbis in the first century taught that it was good to give up to twenty percent of your possessions to the poor, but any more than that was inappropriate. In other words, they put a limit on the amount one should give so that if someone gave more than that he wouldn’t make the rest of them look bad.

But Paul is describing someone who gives away *all* his possessions. His home, his cars, his money, his toys, his clothes—everything. But he doesn’t stop there. He gives his life.

Some scholars have suggested that the words, “surrender my body to the flames” or literally, “to be burned” was a reference to a practice that is documented in the history of the early church. Apparently there were believers who offered to sell themselves into slavery in order to liberate slaves whom they considered to be of greater value to the church. When they sold themselves they would be “burned” by a branding iron.

That is a possible meaning. But given Paul’s use of hyperbole in these verses it seems more likely that he’s referring to someone actually giving his life. Remember, the Emperor Nero, at this time, took pleasure in dipping Christians in oil, then setting them on fire to light the paths of his garden. No doubt the people in Corinth had heard about this practice.

But whatever “surrendering my body to be burned” means, we know for certain that it is intended to describe extreme sacrifice—the most extreme sacrifice possible. So in this hypothetical situation, Paul is not only a philanthropist, he’s a martyr.

But he says, “Even if I do these things and have not love, I gain nothing.”

Obviously, giving and sacrificing helps the people who are the beneficiaries of those gifts and sacrifices. They may no longer be hungry or poor. They may have their needs met. But the person giving the gift or making the sacrifice benefits *only* if it is done in love. And Paul is talking about eternal benefit here—heavenly reward. He might receive some personal satisfaction; she might be recognized and applauded by others for her generosity. But he/she won’t get anything from God.

Paul wants to make it clear that there is absolutely no spiritual gain or merit or profit in

giving to others if it is not given in love. It is love that makes the gift eternally consequential. It is love that makes the sacrifice eternally rewarding. Take away love from the act and you are left with an empty, hollow, meaningless gesture, from God's perspective.

So, the big question is, *why* is love so important? Why isn't the gift or the service or the sacrifice by itself good enough?

Because love is what enables people to encounter God through our gifts and service and sacrifices. Remember, God *is* love, and love comes *from* God. Remember, also, that we who have put our faith in Jesus have the Spirit of God living in us, who gives us the capacity to love *with* God's love. So when we love we are revealing Him, which is the ultimate goal of spiritual gifts, the ultimate goal of the service we render, and the ultimate goal of the sacrifices we make. We are showing other people what God is like.

But when we love we are also glorifying God. We are making Him look good. We are making Him attractive to other people. We are magnifying His goodness, His kindness, His generosity, His compassion, and His grace, which is the ultimate goal of everything we do.

That's why Paul would say so adamantly in these three verses that our spiritual gifts and service and sacrifice, if they are not motivated by and exercised in love, are worthless. Because without love people don't get to encounter God in the things we say and do.

Let me illustrate. I preached my first sermon when I was seventeen years old in my home church. I was preaching to people who had seen me grow up, who were well acquainted with my behavior, who knew my character well. I preached from Philippians 2, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider other's better than yourselves." I don't remember anything about what I said about that passage, but I do remember being kind of surprised at how well I did. I did a lot better than I thought I would, and by the nods and smiles from the people in the pews, I think they must have thought so as well.

After I finished my sermon the pastor took me to the back of the church for what Howard Hendricks called "the glorification of the worm ceremony." It's where people shake hands with the preacher on their way out of the building and tell him what a wonderful sermon he delivered. The very first person in line was a lady, who grabbed my hand, looked at me with cold, hard eyes, and said to me with an edge in her voice, "Stan, that was a pretty good sermon, it's just too bad you don't practice what you preach." And then she walked out the door.

I don't recall anything else that was said to me after that. I was too stunned by what that woman said to me to remember anything else.

It didn't take much reflection upon her comment to discover why she said it. She was a mother of a girl in the youth group, of which I was the president. Her daughter was the girl who was a little different. She wasn't very pretty, she wasn't cool. And some of the guys in the youth group teased her... relentlessly, and said things about her that were very funny, but not very kind. And although I didn't say those things myself, I'm pretty sure I laughed. I certainly never spoke up and told the guys to stop it.

That mother, rightly so, saw incongruence in what I said about being considerate of others, and what I actually did, in being inconsiderate of her daughter. And I learned a valuable lesson that day that I've never forgotten. If I don't love, it doesn't matter what I say or how well I say it, it means nothing.

That's true of everything we do in ministry using the spiritual gifts God has given us. Lots of people with the gift of service can make things happen like nobody's business. They

can do it efficiently and skillfully. But I've known some who can be so task or project oriented that they think the *completion* of the task or the project is the goal, and they run people over in the process.

When we do something for the Lord in His church the task is never the goal. Love is the goal. And love is always about relationships, not tasks. It's about people being able to encounter God in what we do—the God who *is* love.

Same is true in leadership. Someone with the gift of leadership knows what to do and where to go and how to get there in the most efficient way. But efficiency isn't the goal of leadership. The destination isn't even the goal of leadership. Love is the goal, and love is always about relationships. Again, it's about people being able to encounter God through how we lead—the God who *is* love.

The same is true with the gift of faith. Someone with the gift of faith knows what God wants to do and believes God to do it. It's not mere optimism; it's absolute confidence in the willingness of God. But I've seen some with the gift of faith be irritated and impatient with those who don't have that gift. I've seen some treat those who don't have it like second-class Christians who are clueless about God's power and God's willingness.

But confidence in God is not the goal of the gift of faith. Love is the goal. The gift of faith is about people being able to encounter God through the person who possesses that gift—the God who *is* love.

I told you at the beginning that in our culture we typically measure success by performance. A successful person, we say, is one who performs well, and we reward people on that basis. That's our culture. That's our system. But that is *not* the way God defines and measures success. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that God defines and measures success by our love. It is love that gives value and substance to our spiritual gifts and service and sacrifices. Love is what makes all these things truly effective.

## The Priority of Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

**Main Idea:** Our service and sacrifices are worthless if they are not motivated *by* love and exercised *in* love

**The Formula: If I...but have not...nothing**

**Verse 1**

Exceptional speech

Meaningless noise

**Verse 2**

Perfect knowledge

Extraordinary faith

Worthless service

**Verse 3**

Extreme generosity

Ultimate sacrifice

No benefit

**The Question: What's love got to do with it?**