

## **WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOU?**

### **1 Corinthians 13:1-3**

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Our Scripture today is 1 Corinthians 13. We share together verses 1-3: "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. 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. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (NIV).

Dr. Thomas Malone of the Atlanta Psychiatric Clinic has made this comment about our greatest need today. He says, "In my practice, people sometimes ask me what psychiatry is all about. To me, the answer is increasingly clear. Almost every emotional problem can be summed up in one particular behavior. It's the person walking around, screaming on the inside, 'For God's sake! Love me!'"

Who here needs to be loved? We all need love. My heart and your heart have an unquenchable thirst for love. Before us today is one of the great things on love, I think one of the greatest literature on love, the greatest sonnet, if we can call it that, on love that has ever been written. This is a chapter which seeks to develop us into loving and loved persons. It's a tribute to the power of Christ, to realize that the man who wrote 1 Corinthians 13 had, at one time in his life, been possessed with raging anger and hatred. He became the Christian apostle Paul. If the Lord could change his life from raging hatred to such sublime love, as is reflected and modeled in 1 Corinthians 13, there's hope for every one of us here, that the Lord can do the same in our lives.

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In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul puts before us the priority of love (verses 1-3), the practice of love (verses 4-7), the permanence of love (verses 8-13). Today especially, we look at the priority of love, in verses 1-3. What's important to you?

I simply want to ask you two questions today. What is your idea of love? The reason I ask this question is because the question naturally issues from the use of Paul's word for love in 1 Corinthians 13. When we talk about love, I think it's important to tack down our definition. When we say "love," not everybody has the same idea of it as everybody else.

When I was a teenager and was going from one hopeless romantic crush to another, I defined love as an itch in the heart that could not be scratched with the hand. That was the profound sixteen-year-old definition. Someone has said, "Love is a warm puppy." or "Love is a warm fuzzy." Someone has said, in the words of a movie, "Love is never having to say you're sorry." Someone else has said, "Love is a verb."

What is your idea of love? The word "love" in the English language has a great range of usage. For example: I love my wife, I love my children, but I also love tacos, I love loud sports clothes (which my wife will not let me wear), and I love back rubs. The New Testament has a very specific understanding of the meaning of love. The early Christians had three Greek words that were available to them in the language, which they had access to to describe love. These words you're familiar with: *eros*, *phileo*, *agape*. You may not know that before the New Testament times, *eros* was the most common word used in the Greek language for love. It was a rather flexible word, like our English word "love." But to the writer of the New Testament and the early Christians, the word *eros* would connote too much of a sensual definition, and they chose not to use it at all. In fact, the word *eros* is not even found in the New Testament, although it is the most common word in the Greek prior to the New Testament used to describe love.

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Another word which was in use was the word *phileo*, which stood for the warmth of friendship.

Christians did use this. It's used in the New Testament.

But the Christians, as a priority, chose to take over the least used word in the Greek language for love, and adopt it as their own—most importantly used—word. It is the word *agape*. A word which is almost nonexistent in classical Greek. It was not used by Plato, Aristotle or Socrates. It is as though, because of Christ and Calvary love, a new kind of love was introduced into the world. As if there was no word in vogue that could adequately describe it. So the Christians reached in to their vocabulary, elevated a rarely used word, and used that word to describe the powerful new affection that bespeaks of Christ and of Christians. It is a new record—*agape*. A glorious word.

When we use the word “love,” therefore, in a Christian sense, we're talking about a particular kind of love, in contrast to what we might say is romantic love, or love as it is often perceived by persons who are not Christians.

#### **I. I want to talk, just for a moment, about the difference between love as it is commonly perceived—romantic love, and the Christian love.**

There are some differences between them.

**A.** Romantic love is anchored in the feelings. Christian love is anchored in the will. Therefore, romantic love is subject often to highs and lows. Since it is rooted in the feeling—when you feel like loving and feel like you're loved, you respond. When you don't, you don't. But Christian love, because it is rooted in the will, is a decision to love, a decision to be loved. It has a more permanent base to it.

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I would not say that Christian love is without feeling. I rather believe that Christian love, because it is based on the will, is capable of far greater feeling than romantic love, which is simply subject to the passing tide of human emotion.

**B.** The second difference between the two is that romantic love depends upon attraction; Christian love depends upon commitment. Attraction—we romantically fall in love. That's another difference between romantic love and Christian love. Romantic love is "You *fall* in love." Christian love is "You *decide* to love." A great deal of difference between the two. In romantic love, you generally fall in love with people who are attractive to you. Although our tastes differ in this matter of what's attractive. I once gave a devotional to a group of married couples, which I entitled "What to Do When Moonlight and Roses Become Daylight and Dishes." Romantic love depends upon attraction. Christian love depends upon commitment. Romantic love looks for beauty and intelligence. It's hard to fall in love with someone who is ugly and stupid. That's why I used to think no one would ever marry me. You laugh now, but I cried then! My mother used to be concerned over my brother's priority in dating. He always wanted to take out what he considered the sharpest-looking girl. And mother would always be asking the question, what kind of character does she have? What's her family like? Mom would continually remind Paul, "Remember that beauty is only skin deep," to which my brother would inevitably respond, "But who wants to marry a girl without any skin?"

But we do like romantic love—to be joined up with someone we feel complements us, that fulfills our own definition of beauty. Commitment is another thing. Commitment is not based on the attractiveness of another person, but goes on loving even when that person is unattractive. A Christian writer tells the story from his own personal knowledge. He says the phone rang in the home of a high society matron in Boston. On the other end of the line was a son who had just

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returned from war and was calling from California. His folks were the pseudo-cocktail, wife-swapping, party kind. The boy said to his mother, "I just called you, mother, to tell you I wanted to bring a buddy home with me." His mother said, "Sure, bring him home for a few days." He said, "But mother, there's something you need to know about this boy. One leg is gone, one arm is gone, one eye is gone, and his face is disfigured. Is it all right that I bring him home?" His mother said, "You can bring him home, but just for a few days." Her son said, "You didn't understand me, mother. I want to bring him home to live with me." The mother began to make all kinds of excuses about embarrassment and what people would think, and the phone clicked. A few hours later, the police called from California to Boston. The mother picked the phone up and the police sergeant at the other end said, "We have found a boy with one arm, one leg, one eye and a mangled face who has just killed himself with a shot in the head. The identification papers on the body say he is your son."

Romantic love loves the person as long as they look whole. As long as they seem intelligent. But Christian love never looks at things simply from an external sense. Christian love requires commitment. That's why when a couple stands before me, as a minister, to be married I say, "Do you take this person for better or for worse, in sickness and in health?" Because love that lasts cannot be based on impulse. It cannot be based upon attraction. It must be based upon commitment. Christian love does not require merit in the one being loved. But rather, it requires merit in the one loving. It's not that I fall in love with someone who is attractive. But in Christ, it's because I am loved that I therefore choose to love.

**C.** A third distinction between the two kinds of love is that romantic love flowers or fades on the basis of another person's response. Christian love drinks from the grace of God. I think in our culture, in society today, so many families and marriages are having great difficulty because our

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society has bought the whole notion, lock, stock and barrel of romantic love without undergirding it with the grace of God and commitment.

The Scriptures say God has poured His love into our hearts. He has shed His love in our hearts. One of the delightful things about Christian love is that the New Testament sees the Christian, not as in the quest for love, but as in the possession of love. That's one of the things the Lord wants you to experience. But love is a possession. Indeed, the love of the Lord for us is based on the fact that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us; and a full supply of love and grace has been offered to us, and we're completely accepted by God and accepted in God. You may have heard so many things to attempt to get you to access your relationship with God on the basis of what you are doing—or are not doing. But the relationship with God begins when we accept Jesus Christ. In that moment, God unconditionally accepts us and loves us. He who has sent His Son into the world to die for us loves us with great love. He accepts us. Because of His love, we can begin to drink from the grace of God and appropriate love in our own life.

The difference between romantic love and Christian love—there are other differences, but it seems to me these are the cardinal ones that we have to focus on.

### **II. What is the meaning of love?**

We've tried to say that Christian love has particular meaning, based upon commitment, that drinks from the grace of God.

What place does this kind of love have in your life? That's what Paul gets to in these three verses in 1 Corinthians 13. What place does this kind of love have in your life?

In one of the opening lectures of a professor to his students, he said that we should learn in life if we were to be successful in Christian living that it was important, not so much to distinguish the good from the bad, for that is very easy to see. Often, the good is very apparent from the bad. But

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the key in successful Christian living and pastoring was to distinguish the good from the best.

That is a more subtle distinction.

That, I think, is exactly what Paul is putting before the Corinthians. It was a need for them to distinguish between the good—that is, the spiritual gifts—and the best. That is love. He commends them for seeking the good but has to say to them, “You’ve neglected the best.”

1 Corinthians 12:31 says, “But eagerly desire the greater gifts.” This could be read as a command meaning that the Corinthians are to desire the greater gift. Or it can simply be read as a declarative sentence, “But you eagerly desire the greater gifts.” Then Paul goes on from there to say, “And now I will show you the most excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). That is, the way of love. Paul’s not putting down the gifts. He’s simply saying that if the gifts are to operate with any kind of force at all and with any kind of Christian impact, they can only function where there is love.

The Corinthians had turned into loveless charismatics. Theologically, they were charismatic. Experientially, they were charismatic. But they had become unlike Christ in being loveless. Tongues, prophecy, faith, martyrdom—all are good, but love is the best. What’s important to you? To the Corinthians, speaking in tongues was important; addressing God, either in private or in public, in an unknown tongue. We know that there are approximately three thousand human languages. It’s a wonderful thing to be able to speak other languages. But Paul says, “If I speak in all the tongues of men and of angels, have human speech and angelic speech, spiritual enablement, what good is that to me if I don’t have love?” (1 Corinthians 13:1). What I pray to God in tongues—here’s how it hits the throne room of heaven. I can pray and think it may be so beautiful and so cleansing for my spirit. I pray to God with my spirit, people around me (if it’s a public setting) may think I’m marvelously worshipping God, but if it does not proceed from

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love—if that speaking in tongues is designed to gain me some spiritual recognition in the group, as though I have attained something and it's not being offered out of a sense of love—love is not informing that expression of a gift. In that case, when my prayer hits heaven, God says to His Son, “There goes that noisy gong again.” Something happens to the sound between earth and heaven. Here it may sound beautiful—speaking to the Lord in other tongues. But when it hits heaven, it's a gong. “Though I speak with tongues, if I have not love, it's nothing.”

What about prophesying? The ability to speak is a wonderful thing. And the person who speaks for God, who tells others what they should do and have those persons listen to them, the prophet who consoles and encourages and rebukes, that's a person with a ministry. “Yet, if it's not of love,” Paul says, “It is nothing.”

There are a lot of end-time prophets who speak without love. Jonah was a prophet, by the way, who spoke without love. You can go preach the gospel of Christ and not have love in your heart. You simply go announce judgment. Jonah went and announced judgment and was really ticked off at God when He decided to love the people that Jonah had been preaching to. It's even possible, in our day, for people to be so caught up in end-time speculation that they become very hard-bitten about a particular view and cease to practice love. I can become so dogmatic in my own view that all views are about equal worth, that I can become unloving towards anybody who is not as elastic as I am on prophecy.

Paul says, “What's the good of this prophecy if it doesn't have love?”

There's fathoming all mysteries and fathoming all knowledge. Here he's not so much talking about the kind of knowledge that invents modern appliances. He's not talking about the sort of mysteries that Sherlock Holmes was involved in. He's talking about Christian mysteries, the



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mystery of the kingdom, the mystery of the church, the mystery of the lawless one. The mysteries he talks about in his letters.

And knowledge—knowledge of Christ, knowledge of God. “If I had all knowledge and understood all mysteries and have not love it would be nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). In other words, if Paul’s going to be a super-student of the Bible—to know verses left and right and have an answer for every occasion, with a chapter and reference point—it’s possible to be a biblical theologian and a scholar, to have all knowledge, but no love.

Faith to move mountains. That’s another marvelous gift, the faith to move mountains. It seems to me that the kind of faith Paul’s talking about is a two-aspect kind of faith. One is the faith that flows in the sense of miracles and healings, the faith to believe God for that. Then there’s the other kind of faith, which I think is part of any success-oriented person. A person who looks at life and says, “I’ve got goals, I’ve got objectives. I’m going to meet those. I’m going to be successful in what I have to do.” Here he’s talking about a person on either end. Though I achieve my goals and I heal the sick—whatever I do that’s success oriented—if I have the faith to move mountains but have not love, I am nothing.

It is possible, for example, to be such a person of faith, to believe that God will do something; whereas, if someone else doesn’t have that same gift of faith or that same operation, they can become very judgmental and intolerant of the individual and say, “You deserve what’s happening to you because you didn’t have enough faith.”

We’ll look in the practice of love about some of the characteristics of love and why love doesn’t operate that way. What good is it that I have faith to move mountains?

And what about benevolence? Benevolence seems to me such an act of love—to give something to somebody else. “Though I give all I possess to the poor” (1 Corinthians 13:3). The literal

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Greek here is, “Though I convert all my possessions into bits of bread for the hungry.” Suppose that I sold everything that I owned and I invited everyone who had a need to show up at the church parking lot at one o’clock tomorrow, to give out my money. I could do all that without love. I might simply be wanting to show the world what a great philanthropic heart George Wood has. What a marvelous Christian he is, that he would do that. It’s possible to give without loving. It’s possible also not to give. There are two sides to this. You can give without love and you can be stingy without love. I think you’re always stingy without love. That is, stingy and lovelessness go hand in hand. But that’s not the point of the message.

So I give it all. We can give from a sense of being recognized. We can give from a sense of duty, or we can give from love. Only when we give from love is it of value to God.

And martyrdom. That was important to many people. That may not be important to you. To be a martyr may not be important to you at all. I think Paul here is equipped by the Spirit to speak prophetically to the early decades of the church. In the late part of the first century and in the second century, there are many Christians who wanted to die for the Lord. It was kind of the crowning act of life—to go out in a blaze for the Lord; to die for Christ. If you had any doubts about your salvation, that guaranteed it. To die for Christ. Many people coveted martyrdom. A noble act—martyrdom. Dying for what you believe. Dying for Christ. As notable as that is, it’s nothing without love. We see martyrs today in various cultures. Martyrs for their faith. They do it without love. It’s perfectly possible to be a martyr and not be a lover. It’s possible for a person to be a martyr in marriage. “I’m going to stay married to you, even though it’s going to kill me. Praise God.” It’s possible to be a martyr to the will of God: “God’s going to make me do it and I’m going to grit my teeth and do it.” Some people have to take the breaks in life. It’s possible to

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be a martyr to the will of God. All that martyrdom for nothing—to do Christian things because that's what you're supposed to do and not do them out of a sense of love.

The great thing about Christian love is that we don't need to begin loving until someone else loves us, because we've already had that event happen when God loved us. We are now free to begin loving and not waiting for another person to take the first step. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, really as a summary: everything minus love equals nothing. Everything you have, minus love, equals nothing.

The Lord only asks us to love in three different ways: to love Him with all of our hearts, mind, soul and strength; to love our neighbor as ourselves; and that's the third—to love ourselves. Love in three directions. Christian love—a priority in life. A life that then becomes free to develop in the pattern of Jesus Christ.

### **Closing Prayer**

As we close in prayer together today, Lord, we ask that the words of our mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our God, our strength and our redeemer (Psalm 19:14). There may be persons here today, I'm sure there are at least three, who on the inside are screaming, "For God's sake, Love me!" We remember, Lord, the Scripture that says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "Behold what manner of love the Father should bestow upon us that we should be called the children of God" (1 John 3:1). If there are persons here today who are alienated from Your love and in whose life the priorities of love have been turned aside to pursue other interests and activities, may this Word today be a lamp unto their feet and a light unto their path. Help us, Lord, to walk as You have walked and to love one another as a reflection of how You have loved us. Help us, Lord Jesus, as an entire church family, to be the kind in whom love is ever present. Help us, not so much, Lord,

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to have a general vague kind of love for the world. Help us, rather, to love one another, with people we know. Help us to display love when it is difficult to love. And help us, Lord, to access all that we do, so that whatever we do comes out of love. We ask this in Your name, Lord.

Amen.