

CAPITAL BIBLE CHURCH
SERMON NOTES

February 17, 2019
PASTOR BILL HAKEN

Perfect Love

“The Priority of Love”

1 Corinthians 13:1 - 3

Big Idea: Love is the highest display of the character of God.

Intro: The Bible's simplest description of God—and therefore God's own description of Himself—is "God is love" (1 John 4:16).

John continues, "and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (v. 16b).

It is tragic that in many churches the love that is basic to Christian character does not characterize the membership or the ministry. Love was missing in Corinth.

Spiritual gifts were present (1:7); right doctrine for the most part was present (11:2); but love was absent.

Throughout history it seems that the church has found it difficult to be loving. It is easier to be orthodox than to be loving, and easier to be active in church work than to be loving.

But the supreme characteristic that God demands of His people is love. In opposing that love the enemy of the church makes some of his supreme efforts.

1 Cor. 13 may be, from a literary viewpoint, the greatest passage Paul ever penned.

It has been called the “hymn of love,” a “lyrical interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount” and “the Beatitudes set to music.”

Studying it is somewhat like taking apart a flower; part of the beauty is lost when the components are separated. Yet when each part is understood more clearly, the whole can become even more beautiful.

This chapter is a breath of fresh air, an oasis in a desert of problems.

It is a positive note in the midst of almost continual reproof and correction of wrong understandings, wrong attitudes, wrong behavior, and wrong use of God's ordinances and gifts.

Chapter 13 is the middle chapter in Paul's lengthy discussion of spiritual gifts (chaps. 12-14). Chapter 12 discusses the giving, receiving and inter-connection of the gifts. Chapter 14 presents the proper exercise of the gifts, especially that of languages.

Here we see the proper attitude and atmosphere, the proper motive and power, the "more excellent way" (12:31), which God has planned for all of the gifts to operate.

Love is more excellent than feeling resentful and inferior because you do not have the showier and seemingly more important gifts.

It is also more excellent than feeling superior and independent because you do have those gifts.

The truly spiritual life is the only life in which the gifts of the Spirit can operate. The health of spiritual living is not reflected in spiritual gifts but in spiritual fruit, the first and chief of which is love (Gal. 5:22).

Without the fruit of the Spirit the gifts of the Spirit cannot operate except in the flesh, in which they become counterfeit and counterproductive.

Through the fruit of the Spirit God gives the motivation and power to minister the gifts of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit, like all of spiritual living, comes only from walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 25). Having a spiritual gift does not make one spiritual. Even having the fruit of the Spirit does not make one spiritual but is simply evidence that one is spiritual. Only walking in the Spirit makes the believer spiritual.

Walking by the Spirit is Paul's way of defining day-to-day obedience to the Word of God and submission to the Lord (Col. 3:16).

The Corinthian Christians were not walking in the Spirit. They were selfish, self-designing, self-willed, self-motivated, and doing everything possible to promote their own interests and welfare. Everyone was doing his own thing for his own good, with little or no regard for others.

Corinthians did not lack in any gift, but they were terribly deficient in spiritual fruit, because they were not walking in the source and power both of the gifts and of the fruit.

Among many things those believers lacked, the most significant was love. Like the church at Ephesus, they had left their first love for the Lord (Rev. 2:4). When we stray from the Source of love, it is impossible to be loving.

Agapē (love) is one of the rarest words in ancient Greek literature, but one of the most common in the New Testament. Unlike our English love, it never refers to romantic or sexual love, for which *erōs* was used, and which does not appear in the New Testament. Nor does it refer to mere sentiment, a pleasant feeling about something or someone. It does not mean close friendship or brotherly love, for which *philia* is used. Nor does *agapē* mean charity, a term the King James translators carried over from the Latin and which in English has long been associated only with giving to the needy. This chapter is itself the best definition of *agapē*.

Dr. Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist and founder of the Menninger Clinic, has written that "Love is the medicine for our sick old world. If people can learn to give and receive love, they will usually recover from their physical or mental illness."

The problem, however, is that few people have any idea of what true love is. Most people, including many Christians, seem to think of it only in terms of nice feelings, warm affection, romance, and desire. When we say, "I love you," we often mean, "I love me and I want you." That, of course, is the worst sort of selfishness, the very opposite of agapē love.

Alan Redpath tells the story of a young woman who came to her pastor desperate and despondent. She said, "There is a man who says he loves me so much he will kill himself if I don't marry him. What should I do?" "Do nothing," he replied. "That man doesn't love you; he loves himself. Such a threat isn't love; it is pure selfishness."

Self-giving love, love that demands something of us, love that is more concerned with giving than receiving, is as rare in much of the church today as it was in Corinth. The reason, of course, is that agapē love is so unnatural to human nature. Our world has defined love as "romantic feeling" or "attraction," which has nothing to do with true love in God's terms.

The supreme measure and example of agapē love is God's love. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16).

Love is above all sacrificial. It is sacrifice of self for the sake of others, even for others who may care nothing at all for us and who may even hate us. It is not a feeling but a determined act of will, which always results in determined acts of self-giving.

Love is the willing, joyful desire to put the welfare of others above our own. It leaves no place for pride, vanity, arrogance, self-seeking, or self-glory.

We are commanded to exercise even in behalf of our enemies: "I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:44-45). If God so loved us that, even "while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:10; Eph. 2:4-7), how much more should we love those who are our enemies.

At the Last Supper Jesus took off His outer garments and began to wash the disciples' feet as a practical demonstration of love to those who, contrary their Master, were then thinking only of themselves.

While Jesus was facing the agony of the cross, His unloving disciples argued about which of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24).

They were humanly unattractive, undeserving, selfish, and insensitive. But the Savior chose to love them supremely, and taught them to love not in word but in deed.

In His kind act, He showed them that love is not an emotional attraction, but selfless, humble service to meet another's need, no matter how lowly the service or how undeserving the person served.

Love is so much an absolute of the Christian life that Jesus said to those disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

Again He said, "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love" (John 15:9).

Jesus left no doubt that love—agapē love, self-sacrificing love—is the supreme mark of discipleship to Him. He both taught it and demonstrated it in the footwashing.

"He who loves his neighbor," Paul tells us, "has fulfilled the law. For this, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Rom. 13:8-9). Lovelessness is behind all disobedience to the Lord, and love is behind all true obedience.

Everything a Christian does should be done in love (1 Cor. 16:14).

"Let all you do be done in love."

Right theology is no substitute for love.

Religious works are no substitute for love. Nothing substitutes for love.

Christians have no excuse for not loving, "because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

We do not have to manufacture love; we only have to share the love we have been given. We do not have to be humanly taught to love, because we ourselves "are taught by God to love one another" (1 Thess. 4:9).

We are commanded to "pursue love" (1 Cor. 14:1), to "put on love" (Col. 3:14), to "increase and abound in love" (1 Thess. 3:12; Phil. 1:9), to be sincere in love (2 Cor. 8:8), to be unified in love (Phil. 2:2), to be "fervent" in love (1 Pet. 4:8), and to "stimulate one another to love" (Heb. 10:24).

Those teachings can be summarized in five keys to loving: (1) love is commanded; (2) love is already possessed by Christians; (3) love is the norm of Christian living; (4) love is the work of the Spirit; and (5) love must be practiced to be genuine.

1. Eloquence without love is nothing

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." (13:1)

In verses 1-2 Paul uses considerable hyperbole. To make his point he exaggerates to the limits of imagination. Using various examples, he says, "If somehow I were able to do or to be... to the absolute extreme, but did not have love, I would be absolutely nothing." In the spirit of the love about which he is talking, Paul changes to the first person. He wanted to make it clear that what he said applied as fully to himself as to anyone in Corinth.

First Paul imagines himself able to speak with the greatest possible eloquence, with the tongues of men and of angels. Although *glōssa* can mean the physical organ of speech, it can also mean language—just as it does when we speak of a person's "mother tongue."

In the context there is no doubt that Paul here includes the gift of speaking in languages (see 12:10, 28; 14:4-6, 13-14; etc.). That is the gift the Corinthians prized so highly and abused so greatly, and I discussed it in detail in my verse by verse teaching of chapter 14.

Paul's basic point in 13:1, however, is to convey the idea of being able to speak all sorts of languages with great fluency and eloquence, far above the greatest linguist or orator.

That the apostle is speaking in general and hypothetical terms is clear from the expression tongues... of angels. There is no biblical teaching of a unique or special angelic language or dialect. In the countless records of their speaking to men in Scripture, they always speak in the language of the person being addressed. There is no indication that they have a heavenly language of their own that men could learn. Paul simply is saying that, were he to have the ability to speak with the skill and eloquence of the greatest men, even with angelic eloquence, he would only become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal if he did not have love. The greatest truths spoken in the greatest way fall short if they are not spoken in love. Apart from love, even one who speaks the truth with supernatural eloquence becomes so much noise.

The gift of language is especially meaningless without love. Paul chooses this as his illustration of lovelessness because it was a sought-after experience that made the people proud. One of the results of the Corinthians' trying to use that gift in their own power and for their own selfish and proud ends was that it could not be ministered in love. Because they did not walk in the Spirit, they did not have the fruit of the Spirit and could not properly minister the gifts of the Spirit. Because the most important fruit was missing from what they thought was the most important gift, their exercising the gift became nothing more than babble.

In New Testament times, rites honoring the pagan deities Cybele, Bacchus, and Dionysus included speaking in ecstatic noises that were accompanied by smashing gongs, clanging cymbals, and blaring trumpets. Paul's hearers clearly got his point: unless it is done in love, ministering the gift of languages, or speaking in any other human or angelic way, amounts to no more than those pagan rituals. It is only meaningless gibberish in a Christian guise.

2. Prophecy, Knowledge, and Faith Without Love Are Nothing

Prophecy without love

In the beginning of the next chapter Paul speaks of prophecy as the greatest of the spiritual gifts because the prophet proclaims God's truth to people so they can know and understand it (14:1-5).

Paul the apostle was himself a prophet (Acts 13:1) and had the highest regard both for the office of prophet and the gift of prophecy.

Continuing his hyperbole, however, Paul says that even the great gift of prophecy must be ministered in love. The most gifted man of God is not exempt from ministering in love. If anything, he is the most obligated to minister in love.

"From everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Luke 12:48). Of all persons, the prophet should speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

Balaam was a prophet of God. He knew the true God and he knew God's truth, but he had no love for God's people. With little hesitation he agreed to curse the Israelites in return for a generous payment by Balak, king of Moab. Because God could not convince his prophet not to do that terrible thing, He sent an angel to stop the prophet's donkey (Num. 22:16-34). Several other times Balaam would have cursed Israel had he not been prevented by God. But what the prophet failed to do through cursing Israel he accomplished by misleading them. Because he led Israel into idolatry and immorality Balaam was put to death (Num. 31:8, 16). The prophet knew God's Word, spoke God's Word, and feared God in a self-protecting way, but he had no love for God and no love for God's people.

Some years ago a young Sunday school teacher came to me and said, "I thought I really loved the girls in my class. I prepared my lesson carefully and tried to make everyone feel a part of the class. But I have never made any personal sacrifice for those girls." She sensed that, with all her study of the Bible, her careful preparation of lessons, and her nice feelings about the class members, she still lacked the key ingredient of agapē love, love that is self-giving and self-sacrificing.

The power behind what we say and what we do is our motive. If our motive is self-interest, praise, promotion, or advantage of any sort, our influence for the Lord will be undercut to that extent—no matter how orthodox, persuasive, and relevant our words are or how helpful our service seems superficially to be. Without the motivation of love, in God's sight we are only causing a lot of commotion.

Jeremiah's ministry was in stark contrast to Balaam's. He was the weeping prophet, not because of his own problems, which were great, but because of the wickedness of his people, because of their refusal to turn to the Lord, and because of the punishment he had to prophesy against them. He wept over them much as Jesus later wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44).

Early in his ministry Jeremiah was so moved by the spiritual plight of his people that he cried out, "My sorrow is beyond healing, my heart is faint within me!... For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken; I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me.... Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (Jer. 8:18, 21; 9:1). Jeremiah was a prophet with a broken heart, a loving heart, a spiritual heart.

Paul also often ministered with tears, frequently for fellow Jews who would not accept Jesus Christ. It was they who caused him most of his trials, but it was their turning against the gospel, not their turning against him, that caused him to minister "with tears" (Acts 20:19).

In Romans 9:1 - 3 he says "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh"

Paul ministered with great power in large measure because he ministered with great love. To proclaim the truth of God without love is not just to be less than you should be, it is to be nothing.

Knowledge without love

Just as prophecy without love is nothing, so is the understanding of all mysteries and all knowledge. Paul uses that comprehensive phrase to picture ultimate human understanding.

Mysteries may represent divine spiritual understanding and knowledge may represent factual human understanding.

In Scripture the term “mystery” always signifies divine truth that God has hidden from men at some time. Most often it refers to truths hidden to Old Testament saints that have been revealed in the New Testament (cf. Eph. 3:3-5).

If he could perfectly understand all unrevealed divine mysteries, along with all the mysteries that are revealed, Paul insists that he could still be nothing. That spiritual understanding would count for nothing without the supreme spiritual fruit of love. This indicates the great importance of love; without it, we can know as God knows and still be nothing.

Adding all knowledge would not help. One could fathom all the observable, knowable facts of the created universe, be virtually omniscient, and he would still be nothing without love. In other words, if somehow he could comprehend all of the Creator and all of the creation, he would be zero without love.

If all of that would amount to nothing without love, how much less do our very limited intellectual accomplishments, including biblical and theological knowledge and insights, amount to without love? They are less than nothing.

That sort of knowledge without love is worse than mere ignorance. It produces spiritual snobbery, pride, and arrogance. It is Pharisaic and ugly. Spiritual knowledge is good, beautiful, and fruitful in the Lord's work when it is held in humility and ministered in love.

But it is ugly and unproductive when love is missing. Mere knowledge, even of God's truths, "makes arrogant"; love is the absolutely essential ingredient for edification (1 Cor. 8:1).

Paul did not depreciate knowledge, especially knowledge of God's Word. To the Philippians he wrote, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment" (1:9).

We cannot be edified by or obey what we do not know. But we can know and not obey and not be strengthened. Only love brings "real knowledge and all discernment." We can know and not be edified. Love is the divine edifier.

Faith without love

If Paul did not depreciate knowledge, even less did he depreciate faith. No one preached the necessity for faith, especially saving faith, more strongly than he.

But he is not speaking here of saving faith but of the faith of confidence and expectancy in the Lord. He is addressing believers, who already have saving faith.

All faith, so as to remove mountains refers to trusting God to do mighty things in behalf of His children. It especially refers to believers who have the gift of faith. Even with this wonderful gift from God—of making the impossible possible—Paul says a Christian is nothing if he does not have love.

It is not by coincidence that the apostle uses the same figure used on one occasion by Jesus. After His disciples failed to heal the demon-possessed boy, Jesus told them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it shall move" (Matt. 17:20).

Jesus was speaking in hyperbole just as Paul is in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. The Lord's point to His disciples was that, by trusting Him completely, nothing in their ministry would "be impossible." Paul's point is that, even if a person had that great degree of prayerful trust in the Lord, but was unloving, he would be nothing.

Jonah had great faith. It was because of his great belief in the effectiveness of God's Word that he resisted preaching to Nineveh. He was not afraid of failure but of success.

He had great faith in the power of God's Word. His problem was that he did not want the wicked Ninevites to be saved. He had no love for them, not even after they repented. He did not want them saved and was resentful of the Lord's saving them.

As the direct result of the prophet's preaching, everyone in the city from the king down repented. Even the animals were covered with sackcloth as a symbol of repentance. God miraculously spared Nineveh, just as Jonah knew he would.

Then we read of one of the strangest and most hardhearted prayers in all Scripture:

"But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, 'Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. Therefore now O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life'" (Jonah 4:1-3).

Everything Jonah acknowledged the Lord to be, the prophet himself was not and did not want to be. A more loveless man of God is hard to imagine. His faith told him that a great success would come in Nineveh, but the prophet was a great failure. The preaching wrought a great miracle, as he believed it would, but the preacher was a nothing.

3. Benevolence and Martyrdom without Love are Nothing

Agapē love is always self-sacrificing, but self-sacrifice does not necessarily come from love. Throughout the history of the church certain groups and movements have believed that self-denial, self-humiliation, and even self-affliction in themselves bring spiritual merit.

Many cults and pagan religions place great emphasis on the giving up of possessions, on sacrifice of various sorts, and on religious acts of supposed self-effacement, self-deprivation, self-affliction, and monasticism. Even for Christians, however, such things are worse than worthless without love.

Without love, in fact, they are anything but selfless. The real focus of such practices is not God nor others, but self—either in the form of legalistic fear of not doing those things or for the praise and imagined blessing for doing them. The motive is self, and is neither spiritual nor loving.

Benevolence without love

The term for give means to dole out in small quantities, and signifies a long-term, systematic program of giving away everything one possesses.

Such an ultimate act of benevolence, giving all one's possessions to feed the poor, would not be a spiritual deed if not done out of genuine love, no matter how great the sacrifice or how many people were fed.

The rabbis taught that people did not ever need to give more than twenty percent, so Paul's illustration suggested unheard of generosity. Even so, the people who received such generosity would be benefited by full stomachs, but the giver would be benefited by nothing. Both his bank account and his spiritual account would be left empty.

Giving from legalistic obligation, from desire for recognition and praise, or as a way to salve a guilty conscience is worthless. Only love qualifies giving to be spiritual.

Jesus' command to give secretly (Matt. 6:3) helps protect us from being tempted by some of those false, unspiritual, and unloving motives. Benevolence with love is of great worth; benevolence without love is nothing.

Martyrdom without love

Finally, Paul says, if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

In keeping with the extremes he has been using in these verses, it is best to assume he was referring to being burned alive. Execution by burning at the stake, a fate suffered by many Christian martyrs, was not begun in the Roman empire until some years later. Yet that seems to be the form of suffering to which Paul refers - it represented a horrible, agonizing death.

When persecution of the early church became intense, some believers actually sought martyrdom as a way of becoming famous or of gaining special heavenly credit. But when sacrifice is motivated by self-interest and pride it loses its spiritual value.

Even accepting agonizing death for the faith profits... nothing if it is done without true divine love. No matter how much a person may suffer because of his Christian service and testimony, he has no spiritual gain if his witness and work are not ministered in love.

The loveless person produces nothing, is nothing, and gains nothing.

Next week we'll look at the qualities of love.