

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

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[0 : 00] I'm so glad you have joined us this morning on this, what feels like the first day of summer in our church and in our church life, and especially a warm welcome to all of you who have joined us from the Ethiopian Eritrean ministry.

We are so glad that you have joined us this morning. This past weekend, a week ago now, I had the privilege of going to my 25th college reunion which means 25 years ago I graduated, which now makes me feel very old, but it was a sweet time of going back and reconnecting with friends, some of whom I haven't seen for years and years, and being encouraged by seeing them and talking with them about how they have faithfully sought to serve the Lord and to continue walking with Him through many seasons of life, many challenges.

It was really a blessing to be with them. But I was reminded by my friends there of what I was like when I was a freshman.

When I arrived, I had been a Christian for one year, and I was full of zeal and not a lot of humility. I walked into this campus fellowship and instantly saw all the things that they didn't do very well and thought about all the ways that they could do things better.

They had a freshman Bible study, but I thought that wasn't enough. So I created, you can only imagine this, I created among my peers, small groups on our own for more time together of fellowship and prayer and Bible study beyond what they had done because, well, what they were doing wasn't enough.

[1 : 52] I also looked at them and I thought, gosh, I don't think they're doing very good outreach, so I'm going to come and build my brilliant idea of renting a snow cone machine and putting it in the college fellowship hall and hoping that people might come by and talk to us while they had a free snow cone.

It was an abject failure. And yet I thought, hey, at least I tried. Look at me and how much I'm doing for the kingdom of God. Well, as you might imagine, the staff who are still there say, well, yep, we survived Matt's freshman and sophomore year, and in God's grace, there was some growth.

But at the beginning, there was in my heart such a pride, such a critical spirit, such a puffing up of myself and what I thought I was going to bring to this group.

Underneath it, I think I had a desire. I had a desire to make a difference and a desire for God's glory. And that was a good thing. But the bad thing was that I thought that I was the answer to that desire.

I thought I was going to bring the things that was actually going to change the campus in the world. I thought God was pretty lucky to have me on his side, to be honest.

[3 : 20] And it was pretty selfish. It was pretty self-centered and self-oriented. And it lacked a lot of love. I don't know if any of you can identify with that.

A desire to do something, a desire to serve, a desire to help, a desire to make a difference. And yet, often unintentionally, that self-orientation finds itself right in the center of what we do.

How often we think it's about us. Fruit of it in my spirit.

I see it. Even to this day, I can see it creeping in at times. A critical spirit. An impatience with others when they don't do what I think they ought to be doing.

A lack of teachability, where I hold everyone's advice at arm's length and sort of consider it and think, oh, I wonder if I agree with that or not. An unwillingness to listen to someone who I don't automatically respect for a particular reason.

[4 : 31] And interestingly, one of the other things that I've noticed that is actually a part of this is self-pity. When I fail or when I see my own weaknesses, I excuse myself.

I think of all the good reasons why, well, I know I couldn't do that. And yet, that self-pity then also justifies my critical spirit in other people. It wasn't just in my desire in ministry.

It was also, sadly, also true in my dating life for many, many years. Thankfully, God confronted me on that before I got married and did some good work.

He's still at work in my heart. These things are not gone. But by God's grace, there has been some growth. What about you?

Why do you do what you do? What is it that drives your investment in serving, in helping, whether it be in church or in the world?

[5 : 46] What drives you as you're doing those things? There are often, almost always, there's a mixture in that, in the answer to that question.

There are always going to be good things in there. We're about to look at the passage in 1 Corinthians 13. But it comes right after 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul has spent, if you've been here for a couple of weeks, you'll remember this.

Paul has spent this whole time saying, each of you in the church has been gifted by the Spirit of God. And each of you is valuable and important because of the various and diverse gifts that God has given you.

So don't puff yourself up about what you have. Don't look down on other people because of what they have. But each of you, bring your gift to the table and contribute it for the good.

So Paul isn't saying that we don't have things to bring and things to offer and ways that God wants to use us. But he is saying, as we bring those things, whether it's here in the church or in the world, he's asking us a deeper question.

[6 : 56] And that is, how do you hold those things? How do you hold the things that God has given you, the gifts that he's given you, the contributions, the opportunities to serve others?

What do you do with them? That's what leads us to our passage this morning. If you want to turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 13, it's page 940, 50 something, 50.

It's in the bulletin. Sorry, I forgot to look that up. 954. So, and 59. I'm getting hand signals.

This is good. 59. For those of you who can find it. We're going to be looking at just verses 1 through 3 this morning.

So, let me give you a chance to read it. I'm actually going to begin with the last sentence of chapter 12 because I think it is a transitional statement for us. Let's read the Word of God together.

[7 : 58] And I will show you a still, more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Please pray with me as we continue. Oh, Spirit of the living God, will you search our hearts this morning?

Lord, we ask that you would search our hearts to see if there is any wicked way in us and lead us in the way of everlasting. Lord, will you search our hearts to see whether truly we do have love in our hearts?

[9 : 12] God, I pray you would use me in my words this morning. Lord, I pray that you would prepare all of our hearts for the Word that you have for us. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, this is the beginning of, as you know, is one of the most famous passages in the Bible. Many of you have heard it because it's read more often than I think any other verses in the Bible at weddings, and therefore it is one of the most well-known verses.

And you know, using it in weddings is fine, but I want you to recognize that in the context of what the Apostle Paul is communicating to the Corinthian church, the first application is how do we live in community as a group of believers who follow Jesus Christ?

What characterizes the way that we relate to one another? And particularly in this section, how do we, as we gather together like we are this morning, how do we treat one another in the context of our corporate worship?

How do we do that? And particularly the question of spiritual gifts has come up. All of chapter 12 has given us a broad picture of spiritual gifts.

[10 : 30] Chapter 14 will jump to the specific question of speaking in tongues and prophecy and what is profitable and helpful and useful as we gather together in exercising these gifts.

But in chapter 13, Paul goes to the depths of our soul. He goes to the depths of our heart. And it's not a mistake. If you've read 1 Corinthians, sometimes you think, chapter 13 feels out of context. But I hope that you'll see it's not. It actually is at the very heart of the matter. Because what Paul says is love is the primary, the dominant characteristic that God desires to be seen in his people and to be demonstrated to one another.

It is love that shows us that we are truly gods. And it is love that displays to the world the kind of God we serve.

As we come together in these corporate worship and as we live our lives in various other ways. He's saying this is the key to it all. And that's obviously what we're seeing this morning in our passage.

[11:47] One more thing just about context before we jump in is that look back with me at the end of chapter 12. Verse 31.

But earnestly desire the greater gifts, the higher gifts, and I will show you a more excellent way. Paul isn't saying that our gifting is bad.

Paul is saying our gifting is good. Flip over to the beginning of chapter 14. Verse 1. Pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.

Especially that you may prophesy. Nick and Greg will explain that to you. Why especially that when we get there. But for now what I want you to see is that Paul is saying that love is the context.

Love is the underlying character quality with which we are meant to hold the spiritual gifts, the way that we serve, the way we contribute. When love is there, these gifts flourish.

[12:54] When love is there, these gifts have their intended effect on those around us. They have the intended impact that God gave them for us to have.

Which leads us, of course, to our verses. Verses 1 through 3. And you know what, friends? This is a really simple message to preach. There's only one point, right? There's only one thing he's saying. He says it three times, but there's only one thing he's saying. Nothing matters. No service, no gifts, no contributions. Nothing matters when we don't have love.

That's the simple message that I want to explore this morning. So we're going to look at it. How does that message map on to what Paul is addressing in the Corinthian church?

So what happened, what it looked like back then? Then we're going to look at how it might look today. This question of how these things play out. And then we're going to look at how we respond to this challenging passage.

[13:58] And I will say this. Greg next week is going to preach on how to actually do it. What does it look like to actually love one another? So if you're expecting that sermon today, come back next week.

Or pick it up on the website if you're just visiting. It will be there. But we're not going to spend as much time about what love proactively, what the pattern is this week.

Because that's not what Paul is saying. Paul is asking us simply the question, do you have it or not? What did it look like in the Corinthian context then?

What was the question? He's raising a hypothetical question. He starts all of these three verses with if. Even if might be a better translation. Even if I could do all of these great things.

Right? The first thing he talks about is speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues of men and of angels. Even if I have this great gift that you admire and exalt so high.

[14:58] Then he goes on. He says, even if I have, verse 2, prophetic powers. An understanding of all mysteries and all knowledge.

And have all faith. And if the translators were being consistent, there would also be an all in front of prophetic powers. So we would see, if I have all of these things.

Right? And Paul is, again, picking here on some of the things that the Corinthians have valued. You go back to chapters 1 through 4. And you see how much the Corinthians love their wisdom and love their knowledge.

And puff themselves up by thinking, what I have is greater than those poor people who don't have it. He even says, if I have all faith, even to move mountains.

He's talking there about God's miraculous supernatural power to do things that are beyond the expectation of humanity.

[16:07] Beyond our normal experience. Beyond anything that we've seen. Say, even if God is using me in those ways. And then the third thing is he turns from the more spectacular.

In verse 3, he goes to, if I give away all that I have and give up my body to be burned. Here he's talking about a kind of, a less spectacular, maybe in some ways.

But a more tangible and more physical reality of, I'm taking the things that I have and I'm giving them away for the sake of the gospel.

There's a little translation thing that I want to note. If you look at the bottom of your page, there's a footnote. If I deliver up my body to be burned. There's a little number there and you go to the bottom.

It gives an alternate translation. If I deliver up my body so that I may boast. It's one word, it's one letter in the Greek.

[17:18] It's 50-50 as to what it means. I think both of them lead to it. But the reason why I pointed it out is because if it really does mean, if he really intended to say that I may boast, that's clearer, I think.

That clarifies the intention that even if the other translation is better. That I give up my body to be burned. Paul isn't saying this is a commendable thing on its own.

But that this seems to be something done for spectacular effect. So that people would look at me and think, what a great Christian I am that I would be so sacrificial.

What a great person I am that I would do these grand, make these grand costly acts for the sake of others. Paul says, these things may be true in you.

God may be at work in you in these ways. But if I have not love, they are nothing. If there is no love accompanying, undergirding, shaping, and molding these actions, these gifts, these works, then there is no spiritual benefit.

[18:39] Now that raises a question. What does Paul mean, have not love? Does he mean, have not warm feelings for my fellow people? Does it mean that I have the willies because I'm sort of excited about the possibilities of blessing other people?

No. I hope you know this. If you don't know this, you should. Biblical, a biblical understanding of love is not simply nice feelings in our heart towards someone else.

Biblical love has to do with actions. Actions that are not self-oriented, but are oriented for the good of others.

This is what we see in God himself. God demonstrated his own love for us in this. Not that he thought nicely about us.

That's not in the verse. I'm not quoting that verse. That's my interpretation, right? God demonstrated his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[19:55] Love is an action in the Bible primarily. It is also an attitude that results in action. And it acts sacrificially for the sake of others.

This is not only the nature of God's love for his people, but it is to be the nature of God's people as they love one another. 1 John 3.

If you see your brother in need and you do not act accordingly, if you do not respond by seeking to serve him and take care of him, you do not love.

And you have no fellowship with God because of it. Love is not simply caring more about others. It is also about a forgetting of self. This is the trickiest thing about love because it's not something that we can do.

[21:02] Because even acts of love can so easily be infiltrated with our selfishness, can't it? I love you because it makes our relationship more peaceable, more joyful, more happy.

And then I get along with you and that's nice. I love you because people look at me and think, he's a pretty good husband.

He's a pretty good friend. It's so easy for self to insert itself in the way that we love one another.

And Paul says, if we have not love, there is nothing of value that comes of it.

Look at it three times. First one in verse one. I'm a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal. Not quite sure what these instruments were in the first century, but whatever they meant, they were making noise, not music.

[22:10] And they were making loud noise. And he's particularly talking about speaking gifts, speaking the tongues of angels. And what he's saying is, if you're speaking in tongues in the service without love, you're worse than that fan.

You're making lots of noise. And it's not contributing. It's distracting. And it's not helping. It's hurting. But notice that the real fault is not just that the gifts are ineffective.

Verse two. He doesn't say, if I have all these gifts of prophecy and knowledge and wisdom, and if I have this faith, but I don't have love, well, they don't amount to anything.

What does it say? Look with me again. It says, I am nothing. In verse three, he says, I gain nothing. You see, in the very core of this, Paul isn't attacking the gifts. Because you know what the weird thing is? God uses people even when they're not acting in love.

[23 : 24] God in his gracious can use someone who has spiritual gifts. But what he is condemning here is, he is saying, you are nothing.

You, the thing that you most long for in your boastful pride, in your puffing yourself up, in the exercise of it, God looks at you and he says, no, you are not great.

You are nothing. Commentator, Don Carson, says it this way. In none of these instances, does Paul depreciate spiritual gifts.

But he refuses to recognize any positive assessment of any of them unless the gift is discharged in love. Principally, therefore, any particular gift is dispensable so far as spiritual profit or the attestation of the Spirit's presence is concerned.

What he's saying there is, you don't have to have any particular gift or exercise any particular gift.

It's not necessary for you to have spiritual profit or that the Spirit is with you.

[24 : 36] But love is indispensable. When you don't have love, you are nothing. That's a sobering word for us, isn't it?

Now, maybe you're sitting there and you're thinking, yeah, but the Corinthian church was kind of crazy. We've been looking at 12 chapters of their craziness. And, you know, does this really happen today?

Well, clearly, I think it does. Partly because God's word will speak to us today. But also because I've experienced some of these things.

I don't know if you've ever had this experience. When I worked in campus ministry, there were a couple years when I worked at Cornell University. And during that time, I don't know how else to explain it, but God was at work in a special way.

And it was a really, really sweet thing to behold. It was exciting. It was exhilarating. It was challenging. It was stretching. It was growing. Just like in Corinth, it seemed God was doing great things in some ways among this congregation.

[25 : 56] And yet, the danger is that in the midst of all those great things, they could be warped and twisted and actually not end up having the kingdom and the gospel shape that God intended them to have.

And they did not produce the prophet, the spiritual prophet that they were meant to have because of this. I saw this among our students.

A certain faction of them got very caught up in the immediate work of God in their lives, in the way that God was speaking and giving them impressions about what they ought to do and not do.

They talked about praying all night and worshiping all day and there's something in that that was really sweet.

But as it went on, the dark side of what we see in Corinth but have not love was also evident.

Students started coming to me and saying, what's wrong with me?

[27 : 01] Am I just a spiritual dud? Because I'm not like feeling it. And then later on students came to me and said, I don't want to be a part of this anymore.

All I feel is pressure to go do these things or to be this kind of excited or to be to, you know, give up my studies for the week so that I can pray all day and all night.

I said, I don't want to be a part of this ministry anymore. Some of them said, I'm not sure I want to be a part of this faith anymore. Other students came and said, should I be trying to do that?

Is that what it really looks like? Do I have to have these spectacular experiences with God? And so, you see the fruit of it.

There was division. There was spiritual destruction in people's lives. There was pride rampant in certain circles.

[28 : 12] A certainty that God must be speaking through individual people and how necessary it was for everyone else to get in line or not. what about our church?

We're probably not as prone to that. We're all sitting there on our hands as we worship and, you know, we don't get excited very much as we maybe could, maybe should.

But friends, I want you to see that the spiritual gifts maybe, maybe our palette looks a little bit different than the Corinthian church but the danger is still the same.

We've talked about it before but let me say it again. It seems to me that the danger in our church is that gifts of eloquence and gifts of teaching are exalted.

to the detriment of other things. We want to be a church that pursues a knowledge of God but that knowledge of God does not require formal training.

[29 : 27] It does not require polysyllabic theological definitions. It does not require even the ability to speak eloquently about those things.

Hopefully, you have known some, I have known some saints with very little education and yet who know the Lord partly because they know His words so well and it is, it has been ingested and digested and it now shapes their thinking and their lives.

Friends, let us not think that if we teach with great eloquence and with great precision and with great theological knowledge and have not love that God will be pleased with us and with our church.

we do not want to forsake those things but we must have love. We must be thinking how is it that we love one another in this?

Friends, some of you have serving gifts and maybe you feel unappreciated. maybe you feel like you're the second class citizens maybe like you're over at that large institution over there where the professors get all the perks and the janitors clean up all the dirty work and you wonder where's my honor?

[31 : 03] Why doesn't anyone pay attention to me? Am I not serving as well? Friends, God calls you to the same thing.

Will you do it in love? Not because you are honored or respected but because to love is to serve others with or without recognition. And may we as Nick preached on last week recognize that not only do we need one another but we are called to honor one another in the diversity of our gifts and the diversity of our things.

my fear is that we have really talented and gifted people who can fall into exercising those gifts without love.

We have hard working servants who can fall into serving without love. And we have people in this church who withhold their gifts because they do not love the church enough to engage with it and to get involved.

Whether it's for fear of not being valued, whether it's for fear of failing because you're not sure whether you can do it well enough, some of you are withholding your gifts because you don't love this church enough.

[32 : 31] how do we respond to this? What is it that God calls us to in this?

Well, I think there are two things that we need to do in response to this passage. First, we need to take an inventory of our heart.

I'm going to ask you a bunch of questions and suggest a couple of things for you to look for and I want you to pray that the Holy Spirit will help you see if some of these things are true in your heart this morning.

How do we know when we are serving without love? Well, think about these things. How do we treat others who may have different gifts from ours?

Maybe the way they express their faith feels different than ours or maybe we think that they're the way that they're doing their gifts or exercising their gifts are different than ours.

[33 : 42] Do we criticize them for not being like us? Do we have disdain and dismiss them? Do we take them for granted? how about this?

How do you respond when a particular role of service or of leadership has been denied to you or when you've been replaced? When someone is coming alongside or coming up after you and you suddenly feel less valued than you did once?

Do you respond in jealousy or anger? Do you want to just take your ball and go home? Say to heck with this. I'm not going to stay around here.

How do you respond when recognition you've been serving faithfully for a while and then you stop and you think oh surely someone will recognize me and praise me for it and when you don't how do you respond?

Bitterness? Resentment? Do you seek to get back in the game and promote yourself so that someone will finally see you? How do you respond when you see others praised and exalted? [35 : 02] Do you stew thinking that should be me? Why don't I get that? How about this? How do you respond when you fail?

When something you thought you did well is then critiqued, shown to be in need of improvements? Do you give up? Withdrawal?

Stop trying? Do you defend yourself or excuse yourself? Friends, these questions, these heart probing questions are things that we ought to ask ourselves.

More particular ways for us to see whether or not our service is characterized by love. Our contribution is characterized by true love for others.

Paul says there is a more excellent way, a more excellent way of living in love. Greg's going to give us the details of what that looks like next week, right?

[36 : 06] But friends, if we see these things, may we repent of them and may we ask God to work in our hearts because, you know, when we actually do get to serve others in love, it's amazingly joyful.

It's really freeing. You stop thinking about yourself, you have so much more energy and so much more time to actually think about others and you find great joy in seeing them succeed and in seeing good things happen regardless of whether anyone recognizes your service or not, whether anyone recognizes your contribution or not.

And it's so wonderful to be able to love like that. And I pray that you will seek that and long for it. and my guess is if you're like me, you will try to do that and you will fail because we all have this in our hearts, this boastful pride lurking there somewhere.

It may be more or less controlling in our lives, but it is there. Let us seek to know it so that we can repent of it. But secondly and most importantly, let us look to the one who can actually help us in that moment.

[37 : 39] For friends, this passage is a call to serve with love. And where else do we go to find help to do that than our loving Savior?

He who had all the gifts and all power of divinity, he who deserved all glory and honor and recognition, he who needed no justification for his life because he was perfect in every way.

He who lived to do the Father's will in perfect, in perfection, this Jesus Christ showed us the way of love by humbling himself, by becoming obedient to God, by taking on the form of humanity itself.

And not only stepping into the humanity, but stepping into its sufferings. And ultimately taking upon himself the sin of this rebellious humanity that he entered into to identify with.

This Jesus came with great love, forsaking all all of his benefits for our sake, ultimately taking upon himself our sin and the judgment that it deserves before a holy God.

[39 : 07] God judged Jesus for your pride. He put to death Jesus for your boasting and for your loveless service.

Friends, what a Savior we have. Because he did this for us so that we might be set free. He shows us by his example how to do it, but he also changes our hearts so that we are able to do it.

Because when we know that all of the gifts that we have come from him, that he has given us life and freedom from having to justify ourselves and our lives by what we do, trying to make God as well as everyone else accept us and think well of us because of our performance, because of our actions, because of the things we do, because of our small groups and snow cone machines.

he set us free from thinking that any of those things are needed for God to accept us by purchasing our salvation at the cross.

And in doing so, he sets our hearts free. And so when we go to him and look to him and meditate on his work on the cross for us, friends, this is the way to walk in the more excellent way of love.

[40 : 48] Let's pray. Lord, search our hearts.

Show us the reality of the depths of our motivation, why we do what we do. Lord, we know that we are incapable of this kind of selfless love apart from you.

Lord, we ask that you would show us your great love for us, help us to understand it. Lord, to take it in, to believe it, to trust in it, to glory in it, and to revel in it.

Lord, because it is you who first loved us. And by a knowledge of your love, then, we are able to know the way of love and to love one another for your sake.

Help us, Lord, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.