

THE SUPREMACY OF LOVE

By Steve Zeisler

Every generation has its quota of adventurers who set out to discover a way of escaping the ordinary, the humdrum in life. But, having found what they sought, many end up with destination sickness, that terrible malady that afflicts those who discover that what once held out so much promise failed to bring fulfillment after all. Instead of filling the void, the conquest left the heart as empty and lacking as ever. In this study we will encounter a uniquely Christian form of destination sickness.

In chapters 12-14 of 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul challenges his readers to realize that they have special capacities-gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit-that qualify them to meet needs, build up the body of Christ, and extend the kingdom of God. Paul is actually calling the Corinthians to an adventure. That is what the Christian life is meant to be. However, our calling into Christian service must be loving. If it is not, like the destination-sick secular man, we may find that great effort and apparent success have not accomplished anything.

Listen to these opening words of 1 Corinthians 13:

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. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, love does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

FIVE KINDS OF CALLING

Five times in these opening verses the word "if" is used of five categories of endeavor. In every generation, men and women with gifts of the Spirit have set off down these five paths to serve God, often forgetting that the heavenly evaluation at the end of things does not concern the extent of the accomplishment, but the quality of love shown along the way. Let us consider these:

1. Miracles

"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," says the apostle. It is God who gives the gifts of tongues and the interpretation of tongues (I would include in this category other "supernatural" gifts-healings, miracles, etc.), and he expects them to be used in his service. Paul will say later, "I speak in tongues more than anyone." These gifts therefore are important elements of God's plan for his church. But they are capable of creating a "cause" mentality that will divide Christians, and result in arrogance and superficiality. Here, Paul is referring to the passion to over-leap the rational and touch God. Tongues bypass the human mind, according to 14:14: "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful." Many Christians experience a longing for undiluted interaction with God; that which is not mediated by rational thought-i.e. learning something about the nature, purpose, or actions of God-in which he will do miraculous, unexpected things, overturning, changing, and allowing expression that is unpredictable. God gives such gifts and grants such experience, but if they become a cause, they can lead to division and lovelessness.

2. Knowledge

"And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge;... There are other spiritual gifts (often encountered here at Peninsula Bible Church) that can lead to other kinds of useless endeavor. It is possible to be so entranced by the love of studying the Scriptures, to see what they reveal, codifying the truth of God, marveling at the coherence and the wisdom of the depth of the ideas of God, and the prophetic announcement of the truth, that people are stepped on along the way. "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies," said the apostle earlier. Arrogance is one of the frequent companions of the love of knowledge. It is wrong for Christians to feel exalted because of what they know. Certain churches, communities, groups and causes rally around knowledge, preaching, information, ideas, and they are loveless and worthless as a result.

3. Vision

"And if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." The gift of faith is the gift of being a visionary, one who can see what God is doing in the big picture and acting upon that. But some are so entranced by the big picture that they are willing to fudge and lie and disregard ordinary people in their rush to see their plans implemented. Some people are filled with dreams and energy and cannot help but see and respond to the longing to evangelize, teach, feed or uplift the whole world in one generation. Because these gifts demand energy, vast organizations are called into being and high-tech mobilizations are planned. Misrepresentation is excused because of the critical nature of the ministry. But Paul says that "love does not rejoice in unrighteousness but in the truth." If the gift of faith runs out of control, it can be as loveless as any other gift.

4. Mercy

"And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor..." Some Christians feel closest to God when they are meeting the needs of the dispossessed and the suffering. Those who hear the cries of the poor and get caught up in meeting those needs so much so that they have forgotten love also can become pushy, arrogant and self-righteous. They can look down their noses on those who do not feel as they do. They can forget the inner lives of others so burdened are they to meet the needs of the body. They too can reject brothers and sisters who do not see things as they do.

5. Fire

"...and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing." Here, Paul is referring to people who strike off on their own in utter rejection of compromise of any kind. This speaks of a tendency towards martyrdom. In the same way that a fever can burn up a body, this kind of spiritual singlemindedness can produce lives bent on a unique worship or an active service that is bright, intense and consuming. People like this might go out into the desert and live lonely lives in an attempt to create a worship or an obedience to God that is extraordinary. They burn themselves out, spending themselves in some act of dedication. But that too can be accomplished selfishly and in disregard of others. And if it is, it is useless.

In this section then, Paul lists five causes, possibilities, open doors that our gifts might lead us toward. These are things in which we may discover ourselves to be useful: the miraculous, the knowledgeable, the visionary, the concern for the poor, the martyr's brilliance. They are all capable of drawing us out of ourselves and yet may be accomplished without love and be useless as a result. Having arrived at our destination, we discover that we have accomplished nothing.

If love is so important then, how do we define love? If love must be present in order for our gifts to be pleasing in service to God, what is it? In the remaining verses of the chapter, Paul lists the characteristics of love. It is important here to see how concrete is the apostle's description of love. He is not speaking about the theoretical, but the active-how love acts and what it does. Love is an element of your character that can be developed. Love is a choice that you make, not just an idea that you assent to.

MISUNDERSTANDING LOVE

Let us first look at how the word "love" is used in our day, ways that bear no resemblance to the things mentioned here. Many think love is a physical act, or at least a romantic feeling. But romantic love often justifies jealousy, and Paul says that love is not jealous. Romantic love is often insistent, angry and selfish and feels perfectly justified in being so. Fraternal, family or community love can be exclusive, self-impressed and competitive, and thus the opposite of what the apostle speaks of here. Some have written recently of the problems of those who "love too much"-parents who are so solicitous of their children that they do not do the hard things; wives who love their husbands too much and are used by them. Co-dependency, a term that is in vogue today, refers to how the pathology of one partner can be fed by the pathology of the other. These observations can be helpful, but they are not describing love as we find it in 1 Corinthians 13. The word used here, agape, is always offered in strength; a gift from a whole person, It is not a response torn from someone who is too weak or confused to do otherwise.

BEING "OTHER-CENTERED"

Beginning in verse 4, Paul describes agape-the love which comes from God.

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

This verse declares first of all that love is "other-centered." We see this in what love is not (jealous, bragging, arrogant). The opening announcement, "Love is patient," talks about an orientation towards other people. That word is always used in the New Testament of patience with people, not with circumstances. "Love is kind." Kindness requires that you listen attentively so that you know what others will receive as an act of kindness. You can make the same gesture to two people and have it be meaningful in one case and not at all in the other. If you really want to be kind, you have to know the person whom you are trying to reach. A birthday card that has been mailed to you by a computer on behalf of some company or other is not nearly as meaningful as one which has been lovingly and carefully selected by someone who wants to genuinely wish you a happy birthday.

Love is "other-centered," declares Paul. It is patient, expressed by a willingness to wait for someone who is not quite as quick as you. You know why they are burdened and why they cannot go as fast as you. This is a quality that is really needed in parenting. Children have their own pace which, generally speaking, is much slower than adults'. But love is patient and will wait.

Next, Paul gives three characteristics of the opposite of "other-centeredness," which is self-centeredness. Love is not self-centered in that it "is not jealous, does not brag and is not arrogant." Jealousy is a rejection of other people because they have what you do not have. Braggadocio is a rejection of other people because you have what they do not have. And arrogance is to be so inflated with self-importance so as not to notice others at all. Love is none of those things. On the contrary, love is patient and kind.

NOT SELF-INDULGENT

Verses 5, 6 and 7 point up the contrast between self-indulgence and a willingness to sustain others. Love is not self-indulgent. Love does not give itself the right to pout and act irresponsibly and selfishly. Love is not committed to pampering itself. There are four characteristics of self-indulgence in verse 5. Love does not act "unbecomingly," i.e. gracelessly or crudely. Rudeness and crudeness are acts of self-indulgence. If you do not take the time to understand the sensibilities of those around you, you are being self-indulgent. Love "does not seek its own," says Paul. Self-indulgent people are always looking out for themselves. They are always at the front of the line, making sure they get first choice, seeking their own advantage. Love is not "provoked." If you give yourself the right to fly off the handle, to yell and scream and push people around, you are being self-indulgent. You are refusing to control what is in your power to control and you are making others miserable. Love is not provoked but rather restrains itself. Love "does not take into account a wrong suffered."

Love is not vengeful; it does not look for a way to pay back and hurt someone.

How does love reject self-indulgence? Love "does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." What gives you joy are the things that resonate the deepest inside, not the surface reaction but the deep reaction. If the love of Christ is present, then you will not rejoice when unrighteousness gains a brilliant attraction. It means you are committed to the truth; that you will not let lies be part of the process. Then we are told in verse 7 about the staying power of love. Love does not indulge for the moment but is there for the long haul. It "bears all things." It does not give up and quit. It does not cancel out others after a few failures.

And love "believes all things." It does not assume that the bad motives of an individual cannot be done away with but continues to hope for and believe in people when it would be easy to quit, even when they have stopped believing in themselves. And love "hopes all things." Love insists that the outcome is going to be of Christ. It refuses to despair, to let hard times take away its belief that God will triumph. Lastly, love "endures all things." It does not crumble under stress.

These characteristics I take to be the opposite of self-indulgence. They are part of the long commitment to see things through until the end, not the momentary gratification of some surface intent.

THE GREATNESS OF LOVE

Verse 8 begins a description of the greatness of love:

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away with. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away with. When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I have also been fully known. But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

"Love never fails," i.e. it never ceases to be valuable; it never outlives its usefulness. Spiritual gifts do, however. They reach a point when they are no longer needed. We are given gifts and we are told to use them in the service of the Lord. We are made to serve the body of Christ as a hand, an ear, or an eye. We have a calling and it is exciting. But eventually our gifts will not be needed anymore. Paul gives a couple of ways to think about the eventual demise of our spiritual gifts. In one case, he says, "when the perfect comes," i.e. when the complete comes the partial will no longer be needed. We prophesy only in part now; we are not capable of knowing all truth, but when the complete comes there will no longer be need for the partial.

Have you ever tried to find a place using poorly drawn directions? You may get part of the way, but that is all. Once I took a group of young women to a volleyball tournament in another city. The directions were very vague, so vague that if we had not found another driver to follow, we would never have arrived at our destination. But if all you had was an incomplete map, as soon as someone gave you a detailed map you would throw the incomplete one away.

Another way in which we could think of spiritual gifts not being required anymore is to compare the childish with the mature: "When I was a child, I acted as a child," etc. But on growing up, becoming mature, I no longer act childishly. Our wonderful singers and musicians who ministered to us this morning did not have the same degree of skill when they were children. Spiritual gifts are like that, says Paul. They testify to the presence and the knowledge of Christ and to the plan of salvation. But there is coming a day when Jesus himself will fill the horizon and no more testimony to him will be needed. When the mature is there, the immature is no longer needed. What is being suggested here is that all the things which we are doing in ministry, valuable as they are, are one day going to be set aside. All of the things that we construct, all the books that have been written, tapes, etc., will not be needed because Jesus will be fully present.

If you began reading the Bible in Genesis 1 and continued on reading, one of the most startling verses you would come across is Exodus 1:8. You would first read about creation, then the call of God to Abraham, the patriarchs, etc. Then the end of Genesis focuses on the remarkable individual, Joseph, the son of Jacob, who graduated from prison and slavery to become the right hand man of Pharaoh. He ruled the world, saved thousands from starvation, and brought his own brothers to repentance and to humility before God. Joseph was a man of extraordinary power, influence, and personal magnetism. He was loved by all, believer and unbeliever alike. But Exodus 1:8 declares that there came upon the scene a Pharaoh who did not remember Joseph, the very man who had dominated the world stage in his day. Eventually a ruler came along who did not remember him or his influence at all. In Joseph's own generation he loved those who did not love him and their lives were changed by his love. They repented of their sins and they will live forever. Joseph cared for his brothers, for his fellow-prisoners, for his employers and for Pharaohs, all of whom were hard to love. But his fabulous accomplishments were forgotten.

THE THINGS THAT LAST FOREVER

The same will be true of us. Whatever we get done in this church, all the plans we make, the additions and corrections to the minutes, the files, all of the things which for the moment are appropriate and useful, will not be needed one day. But whether or not we love one another; whether or not lives were touched in the Lord's name; whether we refused to be arrogant but were committed to the truth; and demonstrated patience and kindness; refused to be jealous or indulge ourselves and rejoiced in the truth; those things will last forever. They will always be useful.

Do you see the contrast between the first three verses and the last two verses of this chapter? The word "nothing" dominates the opening verses. All of the pursuits and results which Paul mentions there come to nothing: cymbals, gongs, useless mountains of information, lives burned out with enthusiasm, faith which creates great enterprises, all amount to nothing. But at the end of the chapter we discover what will last forever: "faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love."

In closing, we should look carefully at verse 12. Throughout this chapter, love is described in terms of its qualities and characteristics. We can clearly test ourselves as to whether love is filling our experience or not. But in verse 12 we see another critical component to our understanding of Christian love, and that is that love essentially is knowledge of a Person, knowledge by a Person. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known." Looking through an opaque piece of glass we see a Person on the other side. Ultimately, love comes from Jesus Christ who knows us fully, and we are growing in knowledge of him. All we have now is partial information but that is enough to sustain us; it is enough to help us be loving men and women even now.

Think of a soldier who must be separated from his wife and family for long periods of time. All he has to remind him of his loved ones is a photograph of them, a two-dimensional representation of them. But that is enough to keep him praying for them, help him choose purity rather than sin, and make him act responsibly toward them. But the day inevitably comes when he will be face to face with his beloved.

What we have now as believers is the Person we see only dimly. We see enough of him to know how to live. We have been changed by him enough so as to act lovingly in the use of our gifts. But the day is coming when we shall know him as he knows us. Love comes from a relationship which we have with a Person. And love will last forever. But three things remain: "faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

WHEN THE SON OF MAN COMES

In Matthew 25, Jesus refers to the end of everything and talks about the day when the mature will replace the childish, when the complete will replace the partial, when the opaque screen will be done away with, when we will see everything as clearly as it can be seen. Here is what he says, beginning in verse 31:

"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'"

And what will he speak to them about from his glorious throne? Will he speak of theology, of the brilliant analysis of the truth, of the hospitals and the cathedrals that were built, of the computer banks that were dedicated to his service? No, he will not speak of any of those things. Here is what he will refer to:

"For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give you drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'

The Lord will not refer to the enterprise you were involved in but to the individuals along the way whom you had the opportunity to love. You could have treated them with arrogance but you did not; you might have disregarded or been jealous of others. The truth you told, the righteousness in which you rejoiced, those with whom you bore and believed and hoped, all of the opportunities along the way, those are the things he will speak to us about.

But three things remain: "faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

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