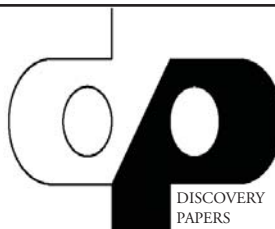


WITHOUT LOVE I AM NOTHING

SERIES: THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE



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1 Corinthians 13:1-3
2nd Message
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The focus of Valentine's Day is on romantic feelings and tender emotions. These are important and delightful, of course, but it's difficult to feel a certain emotion on demand. We may find it hard to know why we should feel a surge of tender feeling for the one we love every February 14th. Tender feelings resist being ordered by the calendar. So the celebration of Valentine's Day has a paradoxical aspect to it.

We are considering a different kind of love as we work our way through one of the best-known chapters of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13. This love is not a surge of emotion. It is the love that God has for us. It can properly call on us to make a choice, take an action, irrespective of how we feel, on any day, in any place.

The word *agape*, which we highlighted in the last message (Discovery Paper 070204), is the word used for love in this passage. It is one of the great words of the New Testament, one of the great themes of the Christian life. Because *agape* love calls us to action and behavior, it makes sense for Jesus to say, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength ... Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:28-31; Matthew 22:35-40).

Agape insists on the intrinsic value of the beloved. It's the opposite of wondering what's fashionable. A person could spend thousands of dollars on a designer garment only to find that a year later the worth of the garment is reduced to near zero because it is no longer in fashion. But love that comes from God and that is expressed through us to others, insists that the beloved is always, intrinsically, and unchangingly valuable. It doesn't matter whether they have scored the most points or won the biggest prize.

Remember the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The father in the story loved both his sons absolutely and equally. He valued them at the highest possible level. It didn't matter how either of them behaved. The struggle in that story was for the sons to know how much their father loved them. His love for them remained constant.

Agape also insists on an enduring commitment to the beloved. Neighborhoods change, careers and business relationships change. Even families are subject to splitting and reforming in different directions. Many churches are

more like a daisy than an oak tree. We are used to relationships that are unstable, that change easily. Yet *agape* love remains committed to the beloved in all circumstances.

Finally, *agape* insists on being willing to sacrifice for the sake of the beloved. It spends itself. Again, the opposite experience is common in so many relationships; even those that call themselves love relationships. "I'll give of myself as long as I can expect to receive an equal amount from you, and we'll both keep track of how much each of us is giving and getting." That's not the kind of love that comes from God. It's not love as we discover it at the heart of the New Testament. *Agape* says, "I'll spend myself for you. I'll choose you before I choose myself." Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Agape is God's heart reproduced in us. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). That's the wonderful, beautiful love 1 Corinthians 13 describes. This familiar chapter calls for response, and it makes a telling argument. Let's read verses 1-3:

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If 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. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

The threefold drumbeat of these verses is the powerful phrase "but have not love." If all these things are true, but I do not love, I am a noise not worth hearing. I have gained nothing. I am nothing.

Christian competition

Remember, the Corinthian church was a place of division, competition, and spiritual pride. They were using the language and the accomplishments of God to promote themselves over one another.

Even though Paul writes in the first person singular, "If I speak ..." he's clearly using himself to talk about the

Corinthians and what they're doing. Each of these three verses represents a point of view held by a different group as an argument to prove their superiority. One group is arguing for the superiority of participation in miracles. A second group is arguing for the superiority of declaring the words of truth. And a third group is arguing for the superiority of social justice.

Those divisions were present in the first-century Corinthian church, they have occurred throughout Christian history, and they are alive and well today. Groups of believers gather around a particular expression that comes from God. They believe it's better than all others, and they assume the way their group does things is superior to the ways of other groups. They stand off from, compete with, and sometimes ridicule groups who are different.

Let's delve into what's going on with each of these factions. In verse 1 Paul says, "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." Tongues are a gift from God. In chapters 12 and 14 of this book, much is said about spiritual gifts. That is, God Himself, present in each believer's life, confers a gift upon them that allows them to serve Him and participate in what He is doing. One of these gifts is a miracle gift of language. We first see this gift on display in Acts 2. The young Christians met together in Jerusalem, and suddenly the Spirit gave them the chance to speak in languages they had not known before. People of many nationalities heard praise offered to God in their own tongue. Normally, of course, it takes a long time to learn a language. Languages never come instantly. But in this case believers were miraculously given the opportunity to praise God in a language they hadn't known, and it resulted in conviction in the hearts of the hearers. It drew attention to God and ultimately led to numerous conversions.

That's the gift that Paul is acknowledging in this verse. Further, I think the saints identified in verse 1 were advocates of other miraculous experiences. They would include in their circle not only those who had the gift of tongues, but probably also those who had the gift of healing, and those who participated in other unexplainable, unpredictable displays of God's power. These were people who loved the drama and emotion that went along with God's sudden and mysterious accomplishments. "Surely," they would argue, "our way of expressing what God is doing is the best way. He is the God of miracles. Surely that's better than everything else."

Verse 2 talks about those who preferred the breathtaking words of God, mysteries unveiled, the mind of Christ made

known, the deep thoughts of God which He had uttered in the mouths of the prophets and put in the words of the Scripture texts, which the Spirit of God Himself would make plain to them. They understood the thoughts of the Lord God Himself. They had answers for life's hard questions, a word to speak to those who were suffering, to those whose lives were chaotic. (Now obviously, if PBC is going to fit in one of these three categories, this would be the one. We have a preference for explanations, for instruction, for talking about what God has said.) But at the end of the day, the proud participants of this group were saying, "Preaching and teaching are the gifts God really prefers. It's folks like us who have gone to the core of what God cares about most."

Before we move on let me comment on the phrase "have a faith that can move mountains." This is clearly hyperbole. Perhaps what Paul is talking about is the ability to describe a possibility in a way that brings about significant change. Remember how God permitted Solomon to build a temple for Him, gathering together artisans and skilled workers from all over the world? Similar "mountain moving" today might include building a hospital in Africa, or a school in South Central L.A., or a women's center in Bangkok. The gift of faith sees beyond a difficult obstacle and brings about something remarkable in its place. Yet this use of persuasive speech, like all other preaching, is useless without love.

Finally in verse 3 there is a group of activists. Their lives were spent in a noble cause, refusing the things of this world that ordinary people got tripped up on, living lives of cutting-edge severity and poverty. They might die a martyr's death in glorious flames. So they thought, "Surely God likes people like us the best, who are so much more in tune with the hard demands of God and His ways, so much more like Jesus, after all. Surely we're the ones who are doing the best, most important, and most meaningful things."

The Corinthian Christians were using spiritual gifts to compete, to commend themselves, to set themselves off from one another. But to those who preferred miracles and unexplainable demonstrations of the power of God, to those who preferred the words of God and all that they stand for in depth and beauty, and to those who chose severity and heroic sacrifice, the apostle writes, "If you don't have love, it amounts to nothing, and you yourself are nothing."

Let's also look carefully at what the text is not saying.

The evidence of God

Paul is not saying, “You’re making claims that are false. There really are no miracles happening among you.” He’s not denying the appropriateness or the importance of spiritual gifts. In fact, this letter argues strongly for participation in the work of the kingdom, for knowledge of the mind of God, awareness of the miraculous presence of the Spirit, and sacrificial living for the sake of Christ.

We don’t read that God will refuse to accomplish good in others through the choices made by these Corinthians. A work of healing may well be an enormous blessing to the one who receives it. Preaching the words of God may bring much good to the one who hears. But we should be sure that nothing good will be accomplished in the heart of the Christian who uses spiritual gifts for self-promotion.

There’s a reference to angels in verse 1. Probably some of this is hyperbole again. Paul may be challenging the extent of the claims they’re making. But certainly there are times when we fight alongside angels in seeing evil undone. The hosts of heaven, invisible to us most of the time, are attentive to us. In fact, Hebrews 1:14 says that angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation.

Those who “know mysteries” are entrusted with a treasure: the infinite wisdom of God regarding human purpose, the way of joy, and the path of righteousness. In Proverbs 8:22-31, Lady Wisdom is described as the companion of God when the world came into being. We speak of the things of God, and our minds worship, reveling in them. In John 6:68 the disciples said to Jesus once, “You have the words of eternal life.” In Him we have the words of eternal life for a dying world.

Those who bring about justice where injustice has reigned, who wipe away the tears of the sorrowful, spending themselves as martyrs, do extraordinary and commendable things.

Clearly Paul is not forbidding his readers to speak of what God is doing in their midst. Yet he raises a necessary question—are such actions motivated by love or self-promotion?

Loveless service

How can we be present in the midst of the important works of God and not have love? What might that look like?

Well, probably it looks something like this: God does the miracles, God grants languages and healing, God si-

lences enemies, God frees those held in bondage; and yet as we participate in such things, we deflect the applause to ourselves. It’s God’s power, but I’m going to bask in the spotlight. I’m going to enjoy being thanked for doing what God alone could do. In fact, I’m going to seek occasions when the power of God redounds to my glory.

When I study the word of God and speak it faithfully, it will do its work, but what I like is the sound of my voice conveying it, the turn of a phrase at which I’m so accomplished. I want (too much) to be well regarded by the people who benefit from the gift of God mediated through my life.

We can be committed to the underprivileged as a category, really care about alleviating poverty, and still avoid actual poor people. The idea of bringing about social justice is one thing; actual hands-on care for those in need is something entirely different.

One of the most famous short teachings of Jesus, the Golden Rule, might benefit us here. We should treat other people the way we want to be treated (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31). I like to be taught biblical truth that I don’t know, to have someone explain to me what I haven’t heard before. But, I don’t like to be taught in a way that makes me feel stupid, or makes me envious of the teacher. I know how that feels. My responsibility is to treat others as I want to be treated. A godly teacher must be concerned to convey blessing, not just information.

Those who find miracles and power encounters central to their ministry can leave behind people who are disoriented, unconnected, and vulnerable to hucksters who claim to dispense powerful blessings. It is important to judge the gifts of tongues and healings by the Golden Rule.

Poor people are often made to feel ashamed or patronized when someone reaches out to help them. Most of us know what it’s like to feel ashamed and patronized, and we don’t like it. Care for the poor should start with empathy, then be followed by activity.

The warning in this text is not about what God will or won’t accomplish. He will do what He intends. The gifts of the Spirit given to the church for the accomplishment of kingdom purposes will march forward. Yet the problem of pride’s overpowering love, evident in this letter, is evident in our experience as well. And those given over to pride are finally, like the chaff, blown away by the wind.

Let me conclude with two observations to help us grow in love. First, one reason that love is hard for us is that

we fear no one will take care of us if we don't take care of ourselves. We fear that nobody has our back. "If I don't take credit for what I've done, who will notice me? If I don't compete, who's going to give me anything that's worth having?" Of course, the answer is: God will. There is One who will care for you, who is profoundly aware of everything that is true of you, and He receives the gifts you give to His heart. We do not need to promote ourselves. He will honor His servants.

Second, we can remember that God loves people who are difficult or threatening to us. We need to let Him do through us what we find it difficult to do. We can't conjure up love. We can't manufacture a good instinct toward folks who don't evoke that in us. We can't make ourselves different overnight by our own strength. But we can let God teach us to see with His eyes and respond with His heart, and He will act through us and do what only He can do.

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