

Love: The Greatest Thing

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

90-402

Let's turn in the Word of God to the thirteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians chapter 13. As I mentioned this morning, over the next number of months I want to do some...some great chapters in the Scripture, some in the New and some in the Old Testament, some familiar portions of Scripture, some perhaps less familiar but significant chapters of the Bible and in a sense hit the mountain peaks as we take a look at God's glorious revelation.

First Corinthians chapter 13 has been determined by some to be the deepest and the purest and the strongest aspect of spiritual life about which the Apostle Paul ever wrote. Some have dubbed it Paul's hymn of love. It is a glorious chapter. It is a beautiful chapter, a magnificent one, but more importantly, it is highly instructive, so much so as to be critical for all of us who are engaged in ministry. Let me read these thirteen verses to you and you follow as I read.

"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. 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 surrender my body to be burned but do not have love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous; love does not brag, it is not arrogant, it 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. 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. For we know in part and we prophesy in part but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like 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 will know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Paul generally wrote his epistles by dictating them to a secretary who wrote what he was saying down. At this particular point, if at this case Paul had been dictating the earlier twelve chapters of this letter to the Corinthians, I am sure his secretary must have dropped his quill and looked up into Paul's face at the sudden dramatic change in the style of dictation. This chapter has a rhythmical beauty. It has a dramatic tone, rich imagery. Up to this point the Apostle has been sort of plodding through problem after problem with rather deep reasoning, carefully worded arguments, explanations and warnings. It's all been very sequential, it's all been very sequential in the sense of thoughts and ideas and patterns. But here, all of a sudden, you have what is almost a lyrical hymn to love, a beautiful gem set in greater brilliance because of what surrounds it. And even what comes after this, starting in chapter 14, is much more very tight, sequential reasoning. Between chapter 12 and chapter 14 sits this magnificent, almost poetic gem that Christians have come to call the love

chapter.

Now there's more than just an aesthetic setting here, more than just a style setting. It's also important to understand the content and how this chapter fits into it. Chapter 12 talks about how God has richly endowed His church with spiritual abilities, called spiritual gifts. He has endowed every believer with spiritual gifts. He says that in chapter 12. "We've all received gifts from the Holy Spirit, we've all been baptized by the Holy Spirit into the church, we have been given the Spirit to dwell in us and the Spirit dispenses to us spiritual enablements."

And chapter 12 looks at those spiritual endowments, those gifts, those abilities by which believers minister to the body of Christ. That's chapter 12. Chapter 14 then gives specific instructions on the specific use of those gifts. So you have the general picture of the gifts and in chapter 12, and their universal dispensation to all believers. And then in chapter 14, instructions as to the proper exercise of those gifts. And dropped in between those two is this chapter on love because the only environment and the only atmosphere in which these gifts function properly is in atmosphere of love. This then becomes critical to understanding all spiritual ministry. Spiritual ministry at its broadest level is the subject of chapter 12. Spiritual ministry at the point of its specific application is the theme of chapter 14. And right here is the environment in which ministry must happen.

Now this is directed at the Corinthians because they had all the gifts. In chapter 1 verse 7 he says, "You come behind in no gifts. You have all the enablements. You have all the abilities, all the Spirit-given abilities." And the categories are given here in chapter 12 as well as in Romans 12 and briefly 1 Peter 4. You have them all but you lack the love to allow them to function with real power and blessing. They were not content to have the Spirit and the Spirit-given gifts. They sought false gifts which would bring them attention and bring them admiration. Verse 31 reads, "But earnestly desire the greater gifts." A better translation of that would be this, "But you earnestly desire the greater gifts." You are chasing the prominent things. You are chasing the public things. He dealt with that in chapter 12. You can't say, "Because I'm not the eye or the nose, I'm not valuable. You can't seek the visible prominent places as if there is no other important place." And he even goes on to say the things that are the ugliest in the human body are the most important. You...he says...are desiring the showy gifts, but I want to show you a more excellent way. I want to show you a better way.

They were proud. They were selfish. They were self-seeking. They were actually operating in the flesh. In fact, it was so serious that chapter 12 verse 3 says, "No one speaking by the Spirit of God says Jesus is accursed." Wow. Some people had so perverted some gifts as to end up cursing Christ. Chapter 13 is not just a beautiful description of love, it is at the very heart of Paul's teaching about ministry, at the very heart of Paul's teaching about spiritual life. Our lives are to be characterized by the dominant Spirit-given fruit of love. The fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22, the first one is love, isn't it? Love. This is the all-encompassing fruit.

In Romans 13 Paul talks about the fact that love fulfills the whole law. In John 13 in the Upper Room Jesus reminded His disciples that by this would all men know that you're My disciples, that you love one another. And where love exists, according to the fruit of the Spirit, where you have love, everything else follows...love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control flow out of love. Love is the controlling reality in all spiritual life. It is to be the controlling reality in all spiritual ministry. In the Corinthian situation, they were trying to have the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit. They were trying to carry on mutual ministry in the body of Christ in a selfish, carnal way without love. And the message of this opening part of chapter 13 is anything without love is

useless.

Let me read the first three verses again. "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 I do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned but do not have love, it profits me nothing." That is strong language. Paul doesn't say a lack of love diminishes our impact, he says it eliminates it. We become nothing.

It is a reality that we all have spiritual gifts. They were given to us by the Spirit of God when we were placed into the body of Christ. Some of those are speaking gifts, according to Peter, some of them are serving gifts. And again, their lists are in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, those are categories of giftedness and all of those categories are blended into the very specific gift that is given to you and to me.

So it is possible to have gifts without spirituality. It is possible to have gifts without the fruit of the Spirit. Having spiritual gifts does not guarantee that you are an obedient believer. It does not guarantee that you have a positive impact on the body of Christ. It does not guarantee that you have power in your life and ministry. The gifts of the Spirit must function with the fruit of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit comes out of walking in the Spirit. That's another study, we'll probably do that some time, Galatians chapter 5. You walk in the Spirit and you then display the fruit of the Spirit and you minister the gifts of the Spirit.

So Paul's great concern is that the main issue is not the exercise of gifts but the love that attends that exercise. Love is the more excellent way. When he says, "I show you a more excellent way," obviously the very next words that come out of his mouth have to do with love. More excellent than the way the Corinthians were functioning, more excellent than their discontent, distrust, jealousy, envy, selfishness, and pride which characterized them as we find out in the opening twelve chapters. They had counterfeited the gifts. They had used the gifts without love. Paul shows the true gifts must work with love to be of any value.

This is something we need to understand no matter what our spiritual ministry is, whether you're the pastor and the preacher, or whether you're serving in some somewhat invisible category of ministry in the life of the body of Christ, the context in which you serve must be love...must be love. I'm so glad that we have a distinctive biblical word for love, agape, from the verb agapao, to love, a word that is rich because it takes us beyond the superficial sentimentality of the word love in our culture. Agape love does not mean romantic love, it's not talking about that. It's not sentimental love, it's not physical love. There are words in the Greek for various kinds of love. There is a word eros(??, that's the kind of love that we associate with sexual attraction. That's the love that takes. Then there is phileo, that's the love of friendship, that's the love that gives and takes. And then there's agape and that's the love that just gives. That's the love that just gives.

It never means emotional love. It's not a tingling sensation. It's not sentimentalism, not at all. It never means simply a friendly cordial hospitality. It's not talking about tolerance. It's not talking about brotherly kindness. It's not talking about some kind of ecumenical love. It never simply means charity, and unfortunately for many centuries it was that way in the King James...charity. That's too narrow that connotes giving to the poor, it's not just that either.

So when we talk about agape, we talk about biblical love, what are we talking about? We're talking about an act of selfless sacrifice. God so loved the world that He...what?...gave...He gave the greatest gift ever given by anyone. Jesus in the Upper Room with His disciples, it says in the gospel of John chapter 13, "Love them to the max, is teleios, he agaped them to the max, to the limit, He loved them to perfection. And how did He demonstrate that love? Before He went to the cross on their behalf, He stooped down and He washed their dirty feet. It's a selfless love.

In the fifteenth chapter of John, on the same night, Jesus says, "No greater love hath any man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." In 1 John, John again says, "Look, if you see your brother have need and you close up your compassion to him, how does the love of God dwell in you?" In the same epistle, he says, "Don't say you love God if you hate your brother." Simply stated, this is selfless sacrifice. It is not something you feel, it is something you do. And for twelve chapters basically, the Apostle Paul has assaulted the lack of love in the Corinthian church which has led to one problem after another. And he's finally come to the pinnacle of the book. He's identified the problem. He's addressed the problem. And now he provides the dominating paradigmatical solution love...love. That's the most important attitude that can possibly exist in the life of believers.

The famous Karl Menninger who left a monumental imprint in the field of psychiatry years ago said a lot of interesting things. I think his most interesting statement is the statement that directs our attention to how he viewed love. He said, quote: "If people can learn to give and receive love, they'll usually recover from their physical or mental illness." Now we're not offering love as a therapy. But even a worldly psychologist understands the power of love in that dimension. We're talking about love as a discipline. We're talking about sacrificial selfless acts on behalf of other people. That's the paradigm in which ministry must be done.

Now as we open the chapter, we're going to learn about ministering in love and I'm going to show you three features here that deal with love. At least I think they'll be four, we'll see as we go...the prominence of love, the perfections of love, the permanence of love and the preeminence of love...the prominence, perfections, permanence, and preeminence of love.

Well let's begin with the prominence of love, the first three verses. I just read them to you, I don't need to read them immediately again to you. This is a very, very powerful portion of Scripture. There's a sense in which some scriptures can be read and you can leave it at that. This really doesn't need a lot of explanation. It is hyperbole...it is hyperbole which is a figure of speech. But we shouldn't be shocked by hyperbole. There are many statements of hyperbole throughout Scripture that are intended for the sake of emphasis to say things in an extreme way. Paul here in these opening three verses pushes everything to its limit, and in doing so, shows us that without love no matter what we do it adds up to nothing. Now let's look a little more specifically.

First of all, he says languages without love are nothing. Verse 1, "If I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

The word "tongues" immediately jumps off the page, doesn't it? Because we're very used to the Pentecostal Charismatic Movement, very used to this notion that people are supposed to be speaking some kind of gibberish if they want to have the baptism of the Holy Spirit and ascend to higher levels of spirituality. I think he uses the word language, it's actually the word language, again

the translation would be more helpful if it were translated languages but because it does refer to the unique gift of that period, it is translated tongues. And we understand that.

It is mentioned first because it was such a huge issue in the Corinthian church. Back in chapter 12, Paul had to address the issue of tongues. He mentions tongues in chapter 12 verse 10. He mentions the fact that there are gifts of tongues in chapter 12 verse 30, some speak with tongues.

This was a big issue. Whoever the person was in chapter 12 verse 3 who cursed Jesus probably did that speaking tongues and perhaps was taken over by a demon and wound up cursing Jesus. It was an issue.

In the church in Corinth they had elevated it way, way beyond where it should have been. And because it was a showy gift and because just about anybody could sort of pull off a substitute or a phony rendition, it became very, very popular, even as it is today. Paul introduces it in the first person, "If I speak," this is a possibility, "If I speak with the languages of men and of angels," now remember, this is hypothetical, "if it do that and I have not love, it means nothing," absolutely nothing.

But just for the moment, what is he talking about? Tongues of men and angels? The New Testament gives us a clear definition of the first, tongues. The word is languages, folks. It's languages...languages. But it was a supernatural ability to speak a language, was it not? Go back to Acts 2 for just a moment. The Day of Pentecost had come, they were together in one place. Suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind. It filled the whole house where they were sitting and there appeared to them tongues, these are literal fire tongues, little pieces of fire visually, distributing themselves and they rested on each one of them and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other languages as the Spirit was giving them utterance. On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit came. How would anybody know that the Spirit came? Well there was a visual indication that the Spirit came. There were pieces of fire coming down that looked like tongue-shaped bits of fire.

And then, in addition to that, the Holy Spirit empowered these believers who were gathered together to speak with other glossa, languages. They spoke with other languages. Verse 5 tells us why, "There were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when the sound occurred, the sound of a mighty rushing wind, the crowd came together, bewildered each one of them was and hearing them speak in his own language. They were actual languages. They knew it. They heard it in their own language.

"They were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Why are not all these who are speaking...why are not all these who are speaking Galileans?'" And Galileans were the hicks of Israel, outside the main stream, country people uneducated. How could they be such linguists and how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the districts of Libya around Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, we hear them in our own languages speaking of the mighty deeds of God. And they were all perplexed and said, 'What does this mean?'" This is not babble. This is not ecstatic utterance, this is genuine human language which people knew and heard and recognized, bonafide human languages. The word glossa means language. Even in the Old Testament it means language when it's used 30 times in the Septuagint of the Old Testament, it always has that meaning.

Now there are two occasions in the Old Testament when the word glossa in the Septuagint is used to speak of unintelligible speech, Isaiah 29, Isaiah 32, but it's not some kind of ecstatic gibberish, it is rather referring to stammering that could not be understood.

So what we're talking about here are languages, clearly languages. This is a gift given by the Spirit of God to people on the Day of Pentecost to speak the wonderful works of God to the Jews in languages that they knew and understood. That's fixed, that's what it always was. Whenever someone in the early church who had the gift of languages was given the occasion and the opportunity to speak under the power of the Holy Spirit, it was a known language...a known language.

What was the purpose of this? Why...why did they do this?

Well, the answer is it was a sign on the Day of Pentecost. It was a sign that God was present. There was no explanation. Galileans weren't multi-lingual, that God was present. The wind, the fire, the languages marked the birth of the church. And by the way, later on as the church expanded and moved into a new era among the Gentiles, later in the book of Acts and then finally among the disciples of John the Baptist later in the book of Acts, the same languages occurred so that each segment of the church being added to the church would know that they received the same Spirit in the same way and they were equal Jew and Gentile.

Anything that purports itself to be the gift of languages that is not a known language is false, it's a perversion. The professor of linguistics at the University of Toronto, Canada said, "Over a period of five years, I have taken part in meetings in Italy, Holland, Jamaica, Canada, USA. I have observed old fashioned Pentecostals and New-Pentecostals. I've been in small meetings at private homes, as well as in mammoth public meetings. I've seen such different cultural settings as are found among the Porto Ricans of the Bronx, the snake handlers of the Appalachians, Russian Molycons(?), I have interviewed tongue speakers and have tape recorded and analyzed countless samples of tongues in every case. Glossolalia which is the term that is used, turns out to be linguistic nonsense. In spite of superficial similarities, glossolalia is fundamentally not language." That still stands. So whatever it is these people are doing, it is not this...it is not this.

You say, "Well maybe the next indicator gets us into the category of what we hear as tongues. What about the languages of angels. "If I speak with the languages of men and of angels." There are many who say, "Well, this is angelic language. It's not the language of men, it's a prayer language. It's angel talk." That can't be. One, there's no precedent anywhere. There's no mention ever anywhere in the Scripture of any angelic language or of anybody on earth speaking any angelic language. And there is certainly no indication here that these are two separate languages. This is simply a subjunctive, hyperbolic non-factual statement. Paul is simply not claiming to speak all languages, though he did speak, as he says in the fourteenth chapter, he is not claiming to speak angel language. He is simply saying in a hyperbole, "If I did speak in the languages of men and even the language of angels." If I could transcend my limitations and even get in to angelic conversation, it really wouldn't matter if it wasn't done in love."

This again is hyperbole. The gift of languages was not for evangelism, 1 Corinthians 14 makes that clear. It was not for personal edification, as it is often stated today. It is not for devotional stimulation.

It is not a proof of Spirit baptism. Its purpose was to indicate the Spirit had come, to authenticate the Apostles and as a sign to unbelieving Jews that they were now under judgment...a sign to unbelieving Jews that they were now under judgment.

Verse 21 of chapter 14, "By men of strange tongues and the lips of strangers, I'll speak to this people and even so, they will not listen to me, says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign." And what was the sign? First when the tongues came they were a sign that God had descended in the power of the Holy Spirit, the church had been born and the Apostles were the representatives of God and their message of the crucified and risen Christ needed to be believed. It was to authenticate the apostles, to show the coming of the Spirit of God and the birth of the church. But when they rejected it, it became a sign to the Jews basically drawn out of Isaiah that when you don't listen when I speak to you in a language you can understand, I'm going to speak in a language you can't understand. According to 1 Corinthians 14:21 and 22 it became a judgment sign.

You say, "Well what were they doing in the Corinthian church then? If it wasn't languages, what were they doing?" They had dragged into the Corinthian church their pagan babble. This didn't originate in Christianity, quote/unquote. Not at all. It was part of their pagan experience, the worship of Dionysius and others, incorporated this kind of ecstatic demonic gibberish. Ecstatic speech was a part of pagan worship, particularly in the rites of Cybele, accompanied by, of all things, smashing cymbals, gongs and blasting trumpets, a cacophony of meaningless noise. And what he says to them is, "If that's what you're doing, it's just pure paganism. Unless you're using your gifts with genuine Spirit power under the influence of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, it is just like paganism. You're no better than a pagan.

Wow, that's pretty strong language. You're using your gift but if you're not doing it in love, you're just like the pagans. It is noise. It is babble. It is meaningless.

Over in chapter 14 verse 7 he says, "Even lifeless things, flute, harp, and producing a sound, if they don't produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? If the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle, so also you, unless you utter by the language speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? You'll just be talking into the air."

Now they had taken these pagan ecstatic kinds of experiences, imported them as they imported so many things into the life of the church and it was a loveless expression. Let me get you to the logical end, the best speech on earth. Even if you did have the ability to speak languages under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the best speech in heaven, even if you could talk angel talk, without love is just nothing, it's noise doesn't rise above pagan racket.

So, there are two things here to say. Stay away from counterfeit gifts, obviously. But even in the exercise of the true gifts, they require love cause speech and language without love is nothing.

Secondly, prophecy without love is nothing, verse 2. "If I have the gift of prophecy, know all mysteries, all knowledge, have all faith, so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I'm nothing." Let's just take the first one.

"If I have the gift of prophecy," this is the greatest gift, the greatest gift. Verse 1, chapter 14, "Pursue

love...pursue love yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy...prophesy." You want to speak. That's what prophesy means, to speak. The one who prophesies, verse 3, speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation." There's the best definition of prophecy in the Bible. Right there, verse 3. The one who prophesies speaks to men for edification, exhortation and consolation, or comfort. This is the supreme gift because it's understood. That's why he says in verse 2, if you're talking in a language only God knows what you're saying, you're speaking mysteries to everybody else. In verse 23 he says, "If the whole church assembles together and you all speak in languages and ungifted men and unbelievers come, they're going to say you're crazy, you're mad. But if all preach, speak that which is edifying, exhortative and comforting, an unbeliever, an ungifted man enters, he's convicted by all, he's call to account by all and the secrets of his heart are disclosed and he'll fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

He's saying, "Speak clearly. Seek to speak the truth clearly." That's why in verse 39, "My brethren, collectively, when you come together to worship, desire earnestly to prophesy. Don't forbid the languages if the Spirit of God has a place for them, but the top of the list is to prophesy." It means literally to speak before, prophimi(?), to speak before, to proclaim truth, the power to proclaim the truth of God, the power to interpret life in the light of Scripture, the power to bring the word of heaven to earth, the power to move eternity into time, the power to make Christ live on the pages of the gospels, to make the arguments of the Apostle Paul understandable, to make the teaching of the prophets and the fathers of the Old Testament clear and understandable. This is the gift of prophecy.

But though you have the gift of prophecy, if you do not have love, you're nothing. And Paul puts it again in the first person. "I am nothing." Preachers with no love are many and they are all nothing...nothing.

To exercise the gift of preaching, proclamation of the truth apart from love for God, love for His people and to do it for self-glory and fame and personal achievement and success and pride is to wind up being a nothing...a nothing. Language without love is nothing. Preaching without love is nothing.

And he says in verse 2, "Knowledge without love is nothing. Even though you understand or come to know all mysteries and all knowledge." Now you can see the hyperbole, right? That couldn't apply to anybody, could it? Nobody has understood all mysteries. No one has all knowledge. And here we see the hyperbole. That is to say again, just so you understand the language here, if you spoke all languages, if you could talk angel talk, if you were a gifted preacher and communicator of truth and if you understood all that could possibly be understood, mysteries...what are mysteries? Things that are unknown to man, hidden until revealed by God. If you understood all the hidden mysteries, if you had all knowledge.

Now what person has that? What person? What theologian? What preacher? What prophet? What scholar? What sage ever knew all the mysteries in God's mind, plan and all other truths in the universe? No one, of course. That's the hyperbole of the whole section. This is his point. If I spoke it all and I proclaimed like no one else could, and I knew everything there was to know, if I had millions of facts and could correlate them all and had not love, I'm what? Zero, absolutely zero.

There are people who are highly educated, who very wise, very knowledgeable, gifted communicators and are self-satisfied and self-promoting and distant from people and seemingly

indifferent and uncaring and in God's view they're nothing. Knowledge, 1 Corinthians 8:1, "Knowledge puffs up, love builds up," 1 Corinthians 8:1. Knowledge without love is impotent. Knowledge with love is potent...potent.

I try to communicate this to young men going out into ministry, whether it's a mission field or pastoral ministry or any other kind of ministry, whatever else you may lack, do not lack love for your people.

And then, fourthly, faith without love is nothing. Verse 2 again, "If I have all faith, if I have so much faith that I could remove mountains," remember Jesus in Matthew 17:20 and Matthew 21:21 talked about he had the faith of the grain of mustard seed you could move a mountain, say to this mountain, "Be removed." And again that's an analogy. Jesus is saying it would be amazing to see what you could do if you put your faith to work. That's what we're having you do with the faith promise, isn't it? Put your faith to work. Move some mountains. This is prayer that will release the power of God, believing prayer, faith that allows God to do the impossible. And again it's a hyperbole...If I have all faith. Well look, we have faith but none of us would stand up and say "I'm here to tell you, my faith is superlative, my faith is comprehensive, I have ultimate faith, I have all faith, I lack nothing. No, no. Nobody would be foolish enough, we all say with the man, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." If I had all faith, faith to the max, faith to the limit and by means of that faith could tap into divine power and do all things and I didn't have love, I would be a big zero. Prophecy, knowledge, power, without love adds up to a blank, an absolute blank.

Well Paul is not finished with us yet. Verse 3, benevolence without love is nothing. Benevolence without love is nothing. "And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor and if I surrender my body to be burned but do not have love, it profits me nothing."

That's an interesting phrase, "Give all my possessions to feed the poor," the phrase "to feed the poor." Very interesting. The verb here to feed is *psomizo*, and it's connected to *psomion* which means a little bite. This is so interesting. So what it's describing here is the ultimate acts of benevolence. This is not "if I send my check to the children's hunger fund." That's not that. "If I give my money to the charity that feeds the kids."

"If I give all my possessions to feed people one bite at a time." That's what it's talking about. This is not talking about somebody who supports the people who do that. He's speaking of someone who gives away all his earthly possessions, takes all that money and buys food and feeds people one bite at a time. That is the ultimate beneficent heart, isn't it? Who does that? We're much more content to send money to somebody else. This is the idea in the language that every single granting of the gift is done by the person himself. This would be tantamount to taking your entire fortune and turning it into five dollar bills and passing out every one of them yourself to every person. There's an aorist verb here that indicates a sweeping gesture, the man liquidates everything and then bit by bit by bit gives it to people who need it.

"Boy," you say, "that's a lot of benevolence." But if you do that, and you're motivated by your own self-glory, you're motivated by your own pride, you're motivated by what you think people are going to think about you when they see that, you're like the Pharisees, right?, and the scribes in the sixth chapter of Matthew who did their alms before men, and who paraded and blew a trumpet and said, "Look at me, I'm giving." You can give without love. You can give without obligation. You can give because you think you're earning your way into heaven. You can give for personal recognition. You can give because of peer pressure. You can give because you really like to shed your guilt. It doesn't

mean anything. It's absolutely meaningless unless it's motivated totally and solely by love, sheer love. And you can pretty well measure the level of your love by the level of your sacrifice, right?

Then he's not done with us. Martyrdom without love is nothing...martyrdom. Now we get to the ultimate sacrifice. "If I surrender my body to be burned but do not have love, it profits me nothing."

Now what is this? If I give my body to be burned. I read one commentator who said, "Well, what that means is to be branded with a hot iron because you've become willing to be somebody's slave and slaves were branded. And what it's really talking about here is surrendering your body to be burned, it's just kind of sticking your hip over there so they can put a brand on it, like a cow."

I don't know where he got it, but it's ridiculous. This is not a fire that puts a brand on you. This is not a tattoo. This is a fire that consumes. Maybe he's...maybe Paul remembers Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, right? Daniel 3. And maybe he'd run into a very famous monument in Athens called "The Indian's Tomb," east Indian. There an Indian head burned himself in public in ancient Athens and there was a monument where he had burned himself and the monument is engraved and it said this, "Zamano Chugas(???)", an Indian from Bargasosa(?), according to the traditional customs of the Indians, made himself immortal and lies here. Oh, that's how you get to be immortal. I think there's some Muslims who must have seen that statue and bought that theology, who blow themselves to bits in a fiery death, they're motivated by immortality? There's no love in that. It is tragic and it is meaningless.

There have been Buddhists who emulated themselves, set themselves on fire. It can be done out of glory, self-glory, self-delusion, self-deception. But it is in reality the final sacrifice you will ever make and if you do that, and you're not motivated by love, even if you gave it in a good cause, your martyrdom would be meaningless.

So what you have here is a very solemn testimony to the importance of love. The loveless person, verse 1 says, produces nothing of value. Verse 2 says the loveless person is himself of no value. And verse 3 says the loveless person receives nothing of value.

It was John Calvin who said, "Where love is wanting, the beauty of all virtue is mere tinsel, empty sound, not worth a straw. Nay more," said Calvin, "it is offensive and disgusting."

Whatever the outside of any deed is, however great, however sacrificial, however significant, it is the inside of that deed that our Lord is concerned about. And the inside must be love. More to come. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, thank You again for a wonderful evening in Your Word, in Your truth and how blessed we are for its riches to mine them out week after week. We love You, we praise You, we thank You for this incomprehensible treasure of truth that we hold in our hands in the holy scriptures and the power they bring to bear on our lives by the Spirit that dwells in us. May this church always be known for its love beyond anything and everything else. May we continue to speak in the languages of the world. May we continue to preach. May we learn and gain knowledge. May we exercise faith. May we find the glorious revealed mysteries of Your own purpose and plan unveiled to us in Scripture. May we make all necessary sacrifices for Your sake but in the end may the center of everything we do be love...love for you and love for others. Then we know our lives will count, will be something that You

bless both in time and eternity. We need You to empower us to that end. We need You to purify us to that end and we want to be known by our love. May people say it's by their love that they give evidence of belonging to Christ. And may we be empowered by that love to accomplish all that You would have us do. We pray in Your Son's name. Amen.

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