

Christianity Minus Love Equals Zero

Our New Testament Scripture is the great thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, a digression from Paul's treatment of the subject of spiritual gifts, which goes from chapter 12 through chapter 14. Although a digression, chapter 13 is actually the most important aspect of Paul's argument. The Christian virtue of love is more important than all the spiritual gifts he discusses in chapters 12 and 14. This beloved chapter has been called "the hymn of love" and "the Beatitudes set to music."

Follow as I read **1 Corinthians 13**:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

You've perhaps seen the Turbo Tax commercial where a "super genius," Michio Kaku, is brought to convince Floyd that filing his taxes with Turbo Tax would cost him nothing. To assuage Floyd's fears that this service must be too good to be true, the genius explains to him what nothing means:

"Nothing is the absence of something. Zero is absolutely nothing. So, it costs you nothing, zero." Finally, the super genius convinces Floyd.

And Paul says with equal conviction, without love our Christian faith is nothing. As you know, love is a very misunderstood and misused word in our language. The Greek uses at least four words to cover the concepts that we intend with our one word, "love"--affection, friendship, eros and charity/agape). On the other hand, we use the same English word to describe a whole range of meanings for love, all the way from sexual lust to delight in chocolates and ice cream and to sacrificial involvement in meeting the needs of others, even our enemies.

“Agape” is the word used in this chapter and used most frequently when talking about the love that characterizes God and that is to characterize the believer. This is the love that is the *sine qua non* of the Christian life, and is characterized by a selfless concern for the welfare of others, without regard for the deserving or response of the ones loved.

Paul Scherer, in his book, *The Word God Sent*, in a sermon on 1 John 4:8, says this statement, “God is love,” doesn’t tell us primarily about God. God is *love*, but also much more. God is holiness, power, wisdom, and so forth. This brief statement, however, is the greatest thing that can be said about love. So, we should read, “*God is love.*” When we have said *God is love* we have said all that can possibly be said about love—its selfless sacrifice, practicality, reach, depth, longsuffering and much more. Love is revealed supremely on the cross, and is the love God commands us to have toward one another (1 John 4:7, John 13:34-35)

In our text Paul twice uses the word “nothing.” Without love we are nothing and gain nothing, he says. Paul says that without love Christianity is nothing. Christianity minus love equals zero, first of all (1-3) because without love there is no help to the church. As we noted from 1 Corinthians 12, the criterion for the legitimacy of spiritual gifts is whether or not they help to build up the church. In Corinth there were church members who were causing divisions in the fellowship, and promoting themselves and their gifts as superior to others with their “lesser” gifts. The gifts of the proud in Corinth seemed to be gifts of speech. In Corinth, eloquence and also ecstasy of speech were cherished abilities and gifts. Gifted orators had status similar to super athletes and celebrities in our culture. In our text Paul is saying that regardless of how important you think you are, without love there is absolutely no help to the church. In fact, there’s harm being done to the church in its communication.

In his letters, Paul uses images, analogies and illustrations from the local culture, and here he refers to the local industry of manufacturing bronze products, used in the theater and in music. The resounding gong may have been a large brass megaphone used to project the voices of the actors in a theater, and the clanging symbol was a brass instrument used to create excitement in pagan worship, and perhaps also putatively to scare away demons!

No doubt Paul was alluding to the sophists and “super apostles” who had been calling attention to themselves and belittling the authority of Paul. He was saying their outward abilities and actions were self-serving and self-centered and were of no more use than noisy “demon-chasers.”

Paul might have employed the analogy of musical instruments because there were people in the church at Corinth who were talented musically but bereft of love. They might have wanted to lead in worship just to showcase their talent, all

the while failing to love their fellow believers. Perhaps they could write or play beautiful music, even about the love of God or about their love for God. But Paul says that to God it's just sentimental noise.

John says the way we sort out the sentimental "love songs and sounds" is whether or not the individual loves God. He writes "This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands" (1 John 5:2). "Don't try to impress me with your beautiful music or sermons about love," John and Paul would say, "if you don't love God by obeying his word, such as the command to do good to your fellow believer and to live a life of holiness and integrity."

Without love there is no help to the church in communication and also there is no help to the church in the realm of information (2). Paul writes about those who have prophetic insight, and who can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge (verse 2). He is saying that even with all biblical and spiritual information, without love, we are useless to the Body of Christ.

I recall a lady in a previous church we served who was one of the most critical people I have ever known. She could find something wrong with everything and everybody. She claimed to have the gift of wisdom and knowledge, yet she was lacking in love, and thus no one ever listened to her knowledge. You could possibly have great insight and knowledge, even in the Scriptures, yet without love your points will not be well taken! People will perceive you as negative and refuse to take your information or advice seriously.

As Paul develops his picture of a believer and a church without love, he includes the unthinkable prospect of acts of supreme devotion and even the ultimate sacrifice being enacted without love (3). Amazingly, it is entirely possible to be dedicated even to the place of giving all your possessions and even yourself to the flames, and still not have love. Without love, however, even the highest sacrifice amounts to zero. Paul says that giving without love for God and his people is of no value in God's sight.

Paul says we need to stand back from our participation in church activities and ask ourselves, "Why am I doing this?" (1-3). What is my motive for serving the Lord and for giving to the Lord? If it isn't because I love the Lord and his people, then it amounts to zero.

Someone has said the name of Jesus can be substituted for love in these verses and they make absolutely good sense. We could without misrepresentation say, Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. Jesus is not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude, nor does he insist on his own way. Jesus is the perfect embodiment of love. And to be like Jesus is the essence of holiness.

The agape-type of love that God has for us and requires us to have for one another is anything but sentimental. It's sacrificial involvement in meeting the needs of others, regardless of their deserving of our love. The Apostle John makes this very clear in his first letter. God loved us in this way through the sacrifice of Christ, and we are to love one another with the same sense of unselfish involvement in meeting the needs of others (1 John 4:7-12).

Ironically, an arena of life where Christian love can best flourish and also die is in the relationship of marriage. Paul writes that Christian marriage is to mirror the love between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:22-33). A marriage counselor says she often reads verses 4-7 of our Scripture with a couple preparing for marriage. She notes that there are no warm, fuzzy ideas in this passage, such as buying flowers and romantic dinners and expensive gifts, important as it is to keep romance in marriage. What Paul refers to, says the counselor, is action. Paul says love is being patient when you feel impatient. It's being kind when you feel unkind, and keeping no score of wrongs when you feel like holding a grudge. This counselor says this kind of love in action is not only how a marriage can survive, but also how it can thrive. And, she concludes that this love, as a commitment to action, is the key to any relationship, even with one's enemies. And such love-in-action is possible only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of loving the needy is to be seen in the life and work of the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She literally poured out her life in selfless love to those dying in the streets of Calcutta, India. When she was being honored for her service to others, she replied with her characteristic humility: "I don't do big things. I do small things with big love." And this is the approach of our Lord Jesus who himself went about doing good (Acts 10:38). And he taught us that greatness is measured in being a servant to others (Matthew 20:26).

Is there ever a day when we are not faced with the choice of loving or ignoring a brother or sister in Christ? The opposite of agape love is not hatred, it seems, but indifference. And we are not acting in love if we see a need and then turn our backs on our brother or sister (1 John 3:16-18).

We are saved by grace, but Jesus teaches that grace so unmistakably produces fruit, that we will be judged by our fruitfulness, the fruit of works done in love, as we see in Matthew 25:31-46. Corinth was known, among other things, for its bronze works, which included bronze mirrors, which though highly polished, yielded only imperfect, obscure images. Were Paul writing verse 12 in our day, he would say, "Now we have only glass mirrors and snap shots."

The Bible is fully inspired, yet our understanding of it is imperfect. Jesus is the perfect revelation of God, yet our perception of him is by our faith, which is imperfect and always struggling and growing. The day is coming, however, when we shall see him face to face, and will be glorified, to know him perfectly, even as he now knows us perfectly. In heaven we'll perfectly know and understand.

We may discover that sins we pointed out in others were not nearly as serious as some in our own lives, that causes to which we gave ourselves were not as crucial to the kingdom of God as we thought. That issues that kept us so preoccupied on earth, and out of sorts with other believers, weren't of eternal significance. We may even be surprised to see in heaven some we thought could never make it. We will discover that what really mattered had to do with the way we loved God and loved others, and all things we did without love didn't count for anything.

We may discover that why we did things and the way we did things were as important to God as how many things we accomplished for him. Paul says we at best are looking at a reflection, or a snap shot. We won't know perfectly till we see Jesus, so let's be a little less sure of ourselves and more confident in God to do what is right. And it's always right to love. Our best Christian faith, most dedicated service and best preaching, without love is zero.