

The Prominence of Love

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1–3

Code: 1863

INTRODUCTION

A. Love: Its Confusion in English

We've been looking at 1 Corinthians 13 and talking about the subject of love--an important subject to talk about. Unfortunately in English, the word love can have many meanings. When people say that they love their car, or their wife, or their dog, or their new dress, they mean different things, don't they? The English language doesn't make this distinction, however. It just uses the same word.

B. Love: Its Clarification in Greek

The Greek language has a multiple of words which the English language translates love. In fact, these different Greek words have absolutely no connection to each other. However, we relate these words because the English word is the same. For example, the Greeks would talk about erotic love, which is the love that we know as a physical attraction between a man and a woman on a sexual level. But the word that they used to refer to that particular emotion (Gk. eros), was not related to their word for love (Gk. agape). They had another Greek word (philos) for friendliness--the kind of warm affection that comes when two people become very close, apart from any sexual attraction at all. That, too, is a totally unrelated and different word than the Greek word for love.

1. The Meaning of Agape

The Greek word that is used in 1 Corinthians 13 for love (agape), is a word that simply means "the ultimate act of self-sacrifice." It is a word which refers to the ultimate act of sacrificing oneself for the good of someone else. In fact, 1 Corinthians 13:1 could easily be translated the following way: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not a spirit of self-sacrifice, I am nothing."

Now that would be the essence of the meaning of the word love as it is in the Greek.

I think the spirit of the meaning of agape is indicated by our Lord Jesus when He said, "Love your enemies..." (Mt. 5:44a). Now what did He mean by that? Well, He went on to say what He meant: "...do good to them that...persecute you." That is the essence of the highest kind of love. It is an act of self-sacrificial service toward somebody who does not necessarily care for you emotionally. To love your enemies doesn't mean to feel erotic about them, or to have a wonderful, warm, and happy relationship with them. Those are all impossible. What it does mean, however, is to make an act of self-sacrifice on their behalf.

You say, "Why are we to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us?" Well, continuing on in Matthew 5:45 Jesus said, "That ye may be the sons of your Father, who is in heaven...." In other words, love your enemies in the same way that God loved His enemies. And how did God love His enemies? He died on their behalf (Rom. 5:8-10). Love, then, is an act of self-sacrifice toward people who are your enemies. That's the pattern of love that God has set for us to follow. It's not emotion but self-sacrifice.

Now, that is precisely what Paul is pointing out in 1 Corinthians 13. No matter what a person is like, how he behaves, or how he relates to you, you are to seek his highest good. That's what God did. And as God "sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt. 5:45b), so you are to shower acts of self-sacrificing service on the deserving and the undeserving equally. Just remember, love is not an act of the emotion, it is an act of the will. To love somebody by an act of self-sacrifice is not a feeling, it is a determination that you make in your mind that this is right and this is what you will do.

2. The Source of Agape

You say, "John, how can I ever get to the place where I will be able to actually step out and touch the life of somebody--who is either deserving or undeserving, who I care about or don't care about--and do an act of self-sacrificing service on their behalf? How can I ever get to that point?" Well, for one thing, you can't just whip it up. You can't get up in the morning and say, "Well, I've been cranky for three days, which is far too long, so today I will love everybody," then go look at your little poster that says, "Love never fails," then read a few Bible verses, and then go out and really love. No, you can't do that. It doesn't work that way at all.

You say, "Where does the capacity to love come from, then?"

Well, when you walk in the Spirit (which means turning your life over to His control, confessing your sin, and allowing the Spirit of God to govern your thought patterns), the Spirit of God will control you and produce fruit--one of which is love. Love will only come in that way. The way you are to approach it, then, is not in a self-righteous determination of your own mind; you are simply to yield your life to the Spirit of God, and the fruit of love will be manifest.

C. Love: Its Corruption in Corinth

The Corinthian church was not walking in the Spirit, yielded to the Spirit, or under the control of the Spirit. They were selfish, self-designing, self-willed, and self-motivated--doing everything they could to promote their own ends. It didn't matter what anybody else was doing or what anybody else needed--everybody was out for himself. In fact, that was the motto of the Corinthian church. They were not walking in the Spirit, so no love was produced. Everything they did manifested antagonism, rebellion, discord, disunity, and disharmony.

Now, it's precisely at this point that Paul speaks to the Corinthians in chapter 13 and says, "The only thing that's going to hang your whole assembly together is love. The only way the spiritual gifts are going to operate is love. The only way you're going to stop the envy, jealousy, pride, and boasting that is present in your midst is to have love. Love is the key to the unity that will paint the portrait of Christ, so that the world can see what He really looks like."

Can unity exist without complete agreement?

If the people at Grace Church had to agree on everything to manifest unity and a single, visible testimony to the world, we'd be in a lot of trouble. Why? Because no matter what we do, somebody wouldn't agree with it. That's a fact. There is always someone who will say, "Well, I don't agree with the way that you're doing thus and so in such and such a place," or "I don't agree with this certain situation," or "I don't like where my class meets," or "I don't agree with what the elders decided about this," or "I wish they had put that pillar over there and that post over there," or "Why aren't these things higher and why did they put the tree here?" There will always be people who disagree! I'll show you my mail. People disagree with me. In fact, when I finish preaching on Sundays, I hurry down the stairs before someone says something that will make me fall over. Once I'm down from the platform, I'm better able to handle their disagreements.

Not everybody agrees on everything in our church; but that isn't the point. We could never get everybody to agree on every little thing. However, what we want to do is this: We want everybody to love in a biblical way so that whether they agree or not is irrelevant. The priority is to sacrifice our own opinion for the sake of the unity of the whole. I don't always agree with every little thing that goes on in everybody's life, but sometimes I have to take a backseat and say, "I think the Lord is leading in a certain way, so I'm willing to lovingly acquiesce to somebody else." That's the spirit of unity.

Unity will never be on the basis of agreement, but agreement can be overruled by love. That's Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 13. The Corinthians had too many clashes going on. There was no way to get them all to think the same way, to agree on the same thing, or to have every little detail in the same box. That just wouldn't work. In fact, the only way that that can happen in a church is if the guy in the

pulpit is an absolute dictator who drives out everybody who disagrees. But then you don't have a church, you have an absolute dictator with a whole bunch of rubber ducks quacking along behind him. That isn't true unity. True unity will come when all of the people, with all of their varying ideas and ideals, are willingly and lovingly anxious to sacrifice their own will for the sake of unity.

The Corinthians didn't even know the meaning of self-sacrifice. Everything they did was only for themselves. Can you imagine what it would be like to have everybody seeking the showy gifts, to have everybody trying to get the glory, and to have everybody trying to lead the group and be the spiritual big shots? Well, there was chaos...absolute chaos. So, Paul stops in the middle of his discussion on spiritual gifts and says, "Now, let me talk to you about love. It doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't make any difference how many talents you have. It is irrelevant what your gifts are. It is inconsequential how seemingly great you are. Your popularity is absolutely unimportant. It doesn't matter how much power you have over other people. If you are not motivated and guided by the reality of self-sacrificing, caring, serving love, you are a spiritual zero. You're not even a one, you're a zero...you don't matter. You make no contribution if love is not the major contribution of your life."Review

Now, what does Paul say specifically? In this chapter he discusses four aspects of love. He talks about The Prominence of Love, The Properties of Love, The Permanence of Love, and The Preeminence of Love. These four areas must be understood. In our last lesson we began to look at...

I. THE PROMINENCE OF LOVE (vv. 1-3)

"[If] I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding bronze, or a tinkling cymbal. And [if] I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and [if] I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And [if] I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and [if] I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing."

A. Languages Without Love Are Nothing (v. 1)

We have already seen, in the Corinthian situation, that it didn't matter if someone had the gift of tongues, or could even speak angel talk. It didn't matter...if there wasn't any love there. Being up front and speaking to crowds of people is a great experience. And eloquence is a characteristic that all speakers desire. People used to say that when Jonathan Edwards was done preaching the people would be lying on the ground, crying out to God for mercy. Imagine the power of that man's words! But even if you had that kind of eloquence and power in your speech, if you didn't have love, it wouldn't matter. To be able to convince people through speech, to capture their minds and their hearts, and to turn their wills to a certain behavior is a tremendous power. But it doesn't matter without love. To be able to play an audience like a master plays a piano--moving them to inspiration, to a calm, to an arousing, to a convincing, to a persuading, to a convicting--is an art that some men have mastered. But if they don't have love it doesn't matter. And in the case of the Corinthians, they had turned the gift of languages into a fleshly ecstasy--a fully pagan activity. So Paul says, "It doesn't matter, you've wasted it."

Now, that leads us into Paul's second point under his discussion of the prominence of love:

B. Prophecy Without Love Is Nothing (v. 2a)

"And [if] I have the gift of prophecy...and have not love, I am nothing."

Prophecy without love is nothing. This is even going further than the gift of languages and to be able to speak with the voice of angels. To have the gift of prophecy is to have the ultimate gift. In chapter 14, prophecy is hailed as the greatest of the gifts. Why? Because it is the proclamation of God's truth in the language that the people can hear and understand.

1. The Elements of Prophecy

I believe that prophecy has two aspects: revelation and reiteration. I want you to know that I speak

the revelation of God--but not for the first time. I simply respeak it as I read it in the Bible. If you study, for example, the sermons of Peter, the sermons of Paul, and the sermon of Stephen, you will find that sometimes they were speaking new truth and sometimes they were quoting old truth--revelation and reiteration.

2. The Expression of Prophecy

If I had the ability to speak the Word of God for the first time, or the power to proclaim old truth with force and meaning and dynamic and drama--without love it's nothing. Now, the word "prophecy" means "to speak before someone." Paul is talking about those people who can stand up and publicly proclaim the truth of God eloquently and dramatically. The gift of prophecy is a tremendous gift: the power to declare the things of God, the power to interpret life, the power to bring the Word of heaven to earth, the power to draw eternity into time. But without love, none of it matters. It is zero.

3. The Enemies of Prophecy

In Ephesians 4:15a Paul says, "But, speaking the truth in love...." That's the balance to the gift of prophecy, or preaching. I've always felt there are two great enemies of a preacher: a departure from the truth and a chilling indifference to the people. And unfortunately, there are many preachers who are out of balance. There are some who have a great love for the people, but don't ever diligently prepare so that they can give them the truth. And there are others who give out the truth, but could care less about the people. One has to fight to keep the balance.

Sometimes in my own ministry, just as I sit down to study, I'm presented with the fact that someone in my congregation has an immediate need that I should meet. I'm often caught in the balance between whether I should stop and go do a deed of self-sacrifice, or whether I should keep studying. Do I concentrate on preaching the truths of God (which I have to study for), or do I meet the needs of the people? That's not an easy question to answer, because preaching is also an act of love to the people. But that's the balance of priorities that all preachers must struggle with.

Unfortunately, there are many preachers who have opted out on both ends. In the name of love for people, some have watered down what they say to such an extent that they are not "speaking the truth" and giving those people the kind of love that will protect them from doctrinal error. On the other hand, there are pastors who decide to teach the truth of God without loving the people.

Consequently, those people soon become convinced that God probably doesn't love them either. So there has to be a balance.

4. The Examples of Prophecy

a. Prophets Without Love There are preachers (modern-day prophets) without love who have only one objective. That objective, according to Albert Barnes, a nineteenth-century minister and commentator, is not to feed the flock, but to fleece it. They don't love the people. They're only in the ministry for fame, power, prestige, personal gain, or to be somebody. They're up for the highest bidder. It's sad, but true. Let me show you a biblical example of a prophet without love:1)

Balaam Numbers 24 gives us a good illustration of somebody who had the God-given gift of prophecy, but didn't love the people. Consequently, he came out a zero. Let's begin at Numbers 24:15: "And he took up his parable, and said, Balaam, the son of Beor, hath said, and the man whose eyes are open hath said; He hath said, who heard the words of God, and knew the knowledge of the most High, who saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open." Now, there's a description of Balaam--a legitimate prophet who heard the words of God, knew the knowledge of the Most High, and saw the vision of the Almighty. This guy had the real gift. Balaam's prophecy starts in verse 17: "I shall see Him, but not now [something's coming, but not yet]: I shall behold Him, but not near [it's going to be a while]: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel...." Who is he talking about? Well, the ultimate end of that prophecy is the Messiah (cf. Gen. 49:10). Here is a man with the gift of prophecy, who was given the marvelous, unequaled privilege of predicting the coming of the Messiah. You say, "That's fantastic. Balaam must have really been something." No. He was nothing. Why? Look at verse 1 of chapter 25. At the end of

the verse it says, "...and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab." Balaam had told the people about the Messiah, but the next thing we find out, the people are committing harlotry with the daughters of Moab. You say, "Well, you sure can't blame that on Balaam. They probably just didn't listen to him." Look at Numbers 31:16, and I'll show you why that isn't true. This is the commentary on Balaam's relationship to all the harlotry that was going on: "Behold, these [the Moabite women] caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD...." You say, "Now wait a minute. Balaam? The prophet of God who knew the truth and spoke the truth?" It's the same guy; but the problem was, he didn't love the people. The Moabites came and said, "Hey, Balaam, how much do you want us to pay you to corrupt the people of Israel?" Well, they bought him off and he enticed the children of Israel to commit whoredom with the Moabites. Look at the end of verse 8: "...Balaam also, the son of Beor, they slew with the sword." Throughout history we have recognized Balaam's ass as more acceptable in the ministry than Balaam, haven't we? Do you know why? Because he was a prophet who spoke the truth without loving the people. You see, genuine love and concern for the people is very important. In Balaam's case, it wasn't there. He prostituted love and turned it into hate. Consequently, the people entered into gross sin and Balaam lost his life. 2) Counterfeit Prophets Matthew 7:21-23 gives another example of prophets without love...only these are counterfeit prophets. Jesus said, "Not every one that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father, who is in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name?... And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that work iniquity." Counterfeit prophets. To speak the truth without love is nothing--it's counterfeit...empty. And that applies to all the spiritual gifts. You may not have the gift of preaching, but you still have the same responsibility to exercise your gift with love. Do you really love the people you speak to about Christ? Do you do deeds of self-sacrifice for them? I believe that unless you do, you really haven't earned the right to speak the truth.

The Power of the Message Is the Motive

A young girl once came to me with tears in her eyes and said, "I teach a Sunday school class of little girls. I thought I loved them, but now I know that I really don't because I've never made any sacrifices on their behalf." Well, that's the essence of it. Do you love the people you preach to? Do you love the people you teach? Do you love them enough to make a sacrifice on their behalf in a personal way? You see, the power behind the message is the motive of the love of God in our hearts. The power of the message isn't vocabulary, cleverness, or diction. The power is the genuine, loving heart of the man or the woman who has the message. How much do you love?

Eloquence can be compared to a melodious organ or a screeching siren. Without love, eloquence is like a screeching siren; but with love it is like a melodious organ. The tongue, without love, is like a snake. It hisses and strikes and poisons with its venom. Only love gives the tongue gentleness and tenderness.

b. Prophets With Love

1) Jeremiah Let me show you a prophet who did have love. His name is Jeremiah. He was a great fellow, but he had a hard ministry. Look at Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed thee in the womb, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb, I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations." He didn't even have a choice, did he? People who struggle over the sovereignty of God should study the subject of God's call of the prophets. All of them were called the same way--Isaiah, Paul, Peter, and anybody else who proclaimed. Even the disciples were sovereignly called when Jesus walked along the beach and told them what to do. And so it was with Jeremiah. Look at verses 6-7: "Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak; for I am a child." In other words, "I've got a bad voice, my diction is lousy, and my mind isn't too sharp either. I'm rather infant in my understanding." But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child; for thou shalt go to all that I shall

send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak." That sounds terrific, doesn't it? I wish the Lord had said that to me. No study or preparation, you just go along, open your mouth, and God puts it in there. That would be great! Well by this time, Jeremiah was probably feeling pretty good about all that God had told him. Then verse 8 says, "Be not afraid of their faces...." What does that mean? Well, God was telling Jeremiah, "They're going to get ugly when you talk and they're going to screw up their faces and be very upset at you. But don't be afraid of it." Why? "...for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD." Now look at verses 9-10: "Then the LORD put forth His hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put My words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant." Now, that's probably the greatest verse in the Bible on the power of preaching. Preaching is the ability to rule nations and kingdoms, to root out, pull down, destroy, throw down, build, and plant. There is tremendous power in preaching, and God told Jeremiah, "You're going to have that power." Continuing on in verses 16-18a, God says, "And I will utter my judgments against them touching all their wickedness.... Thou, therefore, gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee; be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them." In other words, "If you start doubting and getting afraid, I'll make you look bad." "For, behold, I have made thee this day a fortified city, and an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land...." By now Jeremiah was probably saying, "I'm going to give it to them and stick my ground. I'm going to be an iron pillar...very insensitive. I don't care what they say!" Here's Jeremiah: an iron pillar, a bronze wall, a fortified city. If you go to chapter 4, however, you'll see this prophet's spirit. He's been in the ministry for four chapters and he's starting to get a little feedback from the people. Look at his attitude in verse 19: "My distress, my distress! I am pained at my very heart; my heart maketh a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace, because thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war." He's saying to these people, "You're going to get taken into captivity and you're going to be destroyed. A war is coming, the Babylonians are coming, and I can't stand it--it makes my heart run and my soul grieve." You see, Jeremiah loved his people...he cared. Look at chapter 8 verse 18. Jeremiah says, "When I would comfort myself against sorrow, my heart is faint in me." He feels like he's going to have a heart attack. That's how much anxiety he has. Why? Because of "the voice of the cry of the daughter of my people..." (v. 19a). Further, in 9:1 he says, "Oh, that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" Jeremiah was a man with a broken heart, a man with tears, a man who cared, a man who loved. And you can go right on through the book of Jeremiah and find incident after incident of Jeremiah's tears. He's the weeping prophet.) 2) Paul The Apostle Paul was a man who did a lot of weeping, too. In Acts 20:19, he said that he served the Lord "with many tears." In Romans 9:2-3, he wept over Israel. In 2 Corinthians 2:4, he wept over the carnal Christians. In Acts 20:31, he wept over the influence of false teachers. He cried his way through his ministry because he cared. Paul and Jeremiah had the balance between love and truth-- Balaam didn't. To exercise the gift of prophecy apart from deep love for God, deep love for His Word, and deep love for His people, and to do it for self-glory, fame, success, pride, or indifference, is to be a zero in God's eyes...no matter what you are in the eyes of the world. Languages without love are nothing, prophecy without love is nothing, and thirdly...

C. Knowledge Without Love Is Nothing (v. 2b)

"And [if] I...understand all mysteries, and all knowledge...and have not love, I am nothing."

1. The Specifics of Knowledge

a. "...all mysteries..." What does it mean to "understand all mysteries"? Well, first let's define the term "mysteries." This term, which is used over thirty times in Scripture, is always used in a technical way to refer to a divine truth revealed in the New Testament. In other words, a mystery in the Bible is "something hidden in the past which is now revealed." Some of these New Testament mysteries, for example, are: 1) The Mystery of God in Human Flesh (Col. 2:2-3,9; 1 Tim. 3:16) 2) The Mystery of

Christ in Us (Col. 1:26-27)³) The Mystery of the Church as a Body (Eph. 3:3-6,9)⁴) The Mystery of Iniquity (2 Thess. 2:7) There are many things in the New Testament that are referred to as mysteries—something that was hidden and now is revealed. And we are the ones who know these sacred secrets of God. In Matthew 13:11, Jesus called these secrets "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven." And according to Matthew 11:25, He said that these things were "hidden...from the wise and prudent, and...revealed...unto babes." Furthermore, a mystery is a sacred secret that is related to God's redemptive plan and His ultimate plan for history. So, God has certain redemptive truths which He has revealed to us. But there are others that He hasn't revealed. Let's assume, though, that you knew every redemptive fact and could perfectly correlate every redemptive truth. Let's also assume that you knew every single fact about God's ultimate purpose for time and eternity, and could correlate all of those facts. If you knew all of that and didn't have love, you would still be nothing. b. "...all knowledge..." What does it mean to have "all knowledge"? The Greek word here for knowledge is *gnosis*, and refers to facts that can be ascertained by investigation. So, let's say that you knew every secret relative to redemption and God's plan for the ages, and every single fact in existence in the universe. If you knew all of that and didn't have love, how would you rate on a scale of one to five? "Well," you say, "I'd be at least a two or a three." No, you'd be zero. You wouldn't even be a one. Why? Because love is important. Of course, you can't know all of those things. That's why Paul uses the Greek word *ean* with the subjunctive case. It's all hypothetical. But even if you could understand all mysteries and have all knowledge, without love you'd be a zero.

2. The Superiority of Love

It always amazes me that there are some people who think that because they know everything, they have no responsibility to love anybody. There are people who have all their doctrine systematized and categorized, and have all the theological answers. But if they don't have love, do you know what they are in God's eyes? They're nothings...big zeros. Why? Because love is superior to intellectual eminence.

Have you ever heard of anyone with a Ph.D. in love? People receive the title doctor for their intellectual eminence. Our value system isn't all it ought to be, is it? Spiritual insight into the Scriptures is nothing but spiritual snobbery, Pharisaism, and condescension, if there is no love. You see, knowledge without love kills; but with love, knowledge gives life. Knowledge without love is ugly; but with love, knowledge is beautiful. Knowledge without love is impotent; but with love, knowledge is powerful.

In 1 Corinthians 8:1b, Paul hinted at this when he said, "...Knowledge puffeth up, but love edifieth [builds up]." If you have a choice between learning to love and learning some facts, learn to love. The Bible emphasizes this again and again. Now, knowledge is important. God doesn't want a whole bunch of loving ignoramuses who will love themselves right into all kinds of error. He doesn't want us to "love" so much that we won't make any discrimination between who's right and who's wrong, who's saved and who's not. We must have knowledge, but it must be combined with love.

In Philippians 1:9, Paul says, "And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge...." Do you see? You can't separate love and knowledge. They must be kept in perfect balance. However, if you have a choice between going to a class or worship service to learn something, or stopping to help someone on your way who just had a flat tire, stop and fix the flat tire. Love is better than knowledge.

D. Faith Without Love Is Nothing (v. 2c)

"...and [if] I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing."

1. The Gift of Faith Discussed

The concept of faith can take many, many directions. But here in 1 Corinthians 13:2, Paul is talking about the gift of faith, not saving faith. He's referring to the kind of faith expressed in prayer that releases God's power.

a. Matthew 17:20 In Matthew 17:20, Jesus responded to the disciples' question regarding why they

couldn't cast a demon out of a child. Jesus said, "Because of your unbelief; for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Move from here to yonder place; and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible unto you." In other words, Jesus was saying, "If you have the faith to believe God in prayer, you can move mountains." Now, a lot of people get confused by this verse and say, "I've never seen anyone do that." Well, that isn't the point. God doesn't want people literally moving mountains. That would cause all kinds of problems, wouldn't it? Jesus is not speaking of moving mountains in a literal sense. b. Matthew 21:21 In Matthew 21:21, Jesus said to His disciples, "If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall...say unto this mountain [the Mount of Olives], Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea, it shall be done." Now, Jesus doesn't want the Mount of Olives dumped into the Dead Sea. That would mess up the Second Coming. That isn't His point. He is simply talking about people who have the gift of faith.

2. The Gift of Faith Defined

The gift of faith is the ability to believe God continually. It is trusting God when everyone else is questioning Him. It is seen in the person who stands firm and says, "God is still on the throne. So I'm just asking Him to accomplish His purpose, and waiting for Him to release His power." The person with the gift of faith goes through every trial like a rock, while the rest of us are falling apart. That person is able to wait confidently in God until His power is released and he begins to see why God did what He did. Those who have the gift of faith, pray and pray with the kind of trust in God that never gives up. And it's that kind of faith that can remove mountains.

Now, the mountains that faith can remove are not literal mountains. In Matthew 16, Jesus starts talking in parables. So when He talks about a mountain in chapter 17, there is contextual precedence that He's referring to a mountain in terms of an analogy. He doesn't want people moving mountains around; that would be ridiculous. That doesn't accomplish anything. Further, in Zechariah 4:6b-7a it says, "...Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the LORD of hosts. Who art thou, O great mountain?" Now, he's not talking about an actual mountain. He's saying, "When I have the power of God, what mountain can stand in front of that?" So, the gift of faith is the ability to believe God to do things that most people wouldn't hold still to see happen.

What Paul is saying is this: "If you had all faith, faith that never doubted God or even had a tinge of question; if you were such a rock that nothing was impossible for you to believe, nothing brought a question to your mind, nothing was a cause for doubt; and even if you never shook, never wavered in anything, and never questioned God--without love you'd be a nothing." That's incredible. Paul is knocking the pins out from under everybody.

It doesn't matter what gifts you have, how eloquent you are, what you know, or what you believe. You could be a celebrated Christian, theologian, missionary, pastor, teacher, author, or scholar. But if you don't have the agape of God as the driving force of your life, you're a nothing. It's that simple. So, check your motive.

E. Benevolence Without Love Is Nothing (v. 3a)

"And [if] I bestow all my goods to feed the poor...and have not love, it profiteth me nothing."

Love is self-sacrifice, but all self-sacrifice is not necessarily love. Did you get that? There are a lot of Mormons living sacrificially, a lot of Buddhists who burn themselves, and a lot of people doing a lot of strange things for a religion they believe in. However, they're not doing it out of love, they're doing it out of fear and self-righteousness. You can do self-sacrificial deeds for many different reasons. Paul says, "Love is self-sacrifice, but self-sacrifice is not necessarily love. So make sure your motive is love."

1. The Meaning Specified

The word "feed," in verse 3, is from the Greek verb *psomizo*. The noun form of this word, *psomion*, means "morsel." The idea here is a guy who is literally giving away his fortune one morsel at a time. In other words, his giving is the ultimate act of benevolence. He's not just writing a check for the fund to feed the poor, he is going out and giving every little morsel away...piece by piece. So if I was

involved in the actual act of charity--personally giving each small gift to large numbers of individual people--it wouldn't matter, if I didn't have love. If I did it for obligation's sake, if I did it out of legalism, if I did it to salve my conscience, if I did it to get recognition (like Ananias and Sapphira), if I did it because of peer pressure, it means nothing.

2. The Motive Scrutinized

a. The Improper Motives When you go to church and give of your money to the Lord, why do you give? Do you feel obligated to give? Do you feel you have to give to earn God's favor? Do you give to pacify your conscience for a sinful week, hoping God will balance the scale? Do you give to get recognition from the people around you? Do you tell people what you give? Do you feel peer pressure that if you don't give, you won't be able to talk about it the next time the group gets together? Well, if you give for any of those reasons, you're a zero.

b. The Proper Motive What's the only proper motive for giving? Love! That's why we're to do it secretly...privately. It doesn't matter how benevolent you are if you don't love. Luke 18:11-12 says, "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess." Well, Jesus said, "This Pharisee is a zero!" However, the publican "went down to his house justified rather than the other" (v. 14a). Benevolence without love is nothing.

F. Martyrdom Without Love Is Nothing (v. 3b)

"...and [if] I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing."

1. The Possible Interpretations

There are different interpretations about what Paul was referring to by the phrase "give my body to be burned." For example:

a. Branded to become a slave Some think it means to become a slave. In those days when a person became a slave, they branded him with a hot iron that burned his flesh. Some say that Paul is saying, "Even if I became a slave, it wouldn't matter." That's possible.

b. Burned to become a martyr In line with the ultimate nature of Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 13, it would seem to me that the epitome of what he would say would be something like, "Even if I gave my life to be burned at the stake, it wouldn't matter." Now the argument against this interpretation is that some people say, "Well, there was no precedent for burning people at the stake. That didn't go on in Paul's day." Well, that's true. There was not a burning-at-the-stake persecution at the time of Paul. Christians were burned at the stake at a later date. There are, however, several ways to look at it.

1) Future Persecution Paul could have been referring to the burning that was going to come. And he also could have been looking forward to those many Christians who were going to die at the stake for the wrong reasons. One of the interesting things about the martyrdom of the early church, was that many of those Christians developed a martyr complex-- wanting to die as martyrs in order to become famous like other Christians who had died as martyrs. Now it's possible that Paul was anticipating that by virtue of the insight of the Holy Spirit.

2) Past Persecution There's another possibility, too. There were some men in the past who gave their lives to be burned: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Though God delivered them, they were willing to be burned (Dan. 3:16-18).

3) Local Illustration The following story is another possibility: In the city of Athens, which was near Corinth, there was a tomb called "the Indian's tomb." A certain Indian, on that very spot, had lit himself on fire and burned himself to death. Prior to his suicide, however, he had written the following epitaph: "Zamano-chegas, an Indian from Bargaosa, according to the traditional customs of the Indians, made himself immortal and lies here." Here was a guy who burned his body to gain some religious immortality. Maybe Paul had that in mind.

2. The Personal Motive

Whether Paul was referring to the ultimate act of becoming a slave, or to the ultimate act of burning at the stake and dying as a martyr, without love it doesn't matter. A Christian martyr in the second century, a kamikaze, a Buddhist who burns himself, or a missionary eaten by cannibals--none of it

matters if the motive is not love. And I don't think it's cynical to recall that many early Christians sought to be burned so that they could remain famous as martyrs. I also don't think it's cynical to say that deeds that look sacrificial on the surface are usually the products of pride.

The sum of it is this: Languages, or prophecy, or knowledge, or benevolence, or martyrdom don't mean anything without love. It didn't matter what the Corinthians did, if they did it without love. And it doesn't matter what you do, if you do it without love. If the motive isn't love, it adds up to nothing. In fact, you can look at this passage in the following way: Verse 1 says: "The loveless person produces nothing of value." Verse 2 says: "The loveless person is himself of no value." Verse 3 says: "The loveless person receives nothing of value." Life minus love equals zero.

Revelation 2:2-4 says this to the church at Ephesus: "I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them who are evil; and thou hast tried them who say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars; and hast borne, and hast patience, and for My name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted." They had worked hard and they had right doctrine. "Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." Do you know what the Lord did? He removed the candlestick, the church died, and it's never been there since. Grace Church can be in the same situation if it doesn't have love...and so can you as a person.

Focusing on the Facts

1. In our English language, the word love has many different meanings. Is this true in the Greek language? Explain.
2. What is the Greek word for "love" in 1 Corinthians 13? What is the definition of this word?
3. What insight into the meaning of love does Jesus give us in Matthew 5:44?
4. Is biblical love an emotion? Explain.
5. How is it possible for us to love others in the same way that God loves us?
6. Can unity exist without complete agreement? What is the key to unity?
7. According to 1 Corinthians 14, what is the greatest spiritual gift?
8. What are the two elements of the gift of prophecy?
9. Define the gift of prophecy.
10. What are the two great enemies that a preacher must watch out for as he exercises his gift of prophecy?
11. What verse succinctly describes the balance that must go along with the gift of prophecy? What happens to a man's ministry if this balance is not maintained?
12. Was Balaam a legitimate, God-ordained prophet? Support your answer. What caused the downfall of his ministry?
13. The prophet Jeremiah is an example of a prophet _____ love. This is evidenced by his nickname, "the _____ prophet."
14. The Apostle Paul served the Lord "with many tears" (Ac. 20:19). What were some of the things that caused him to weep?
15. What is a "mystery" in the New Testament? Give some examples.
16. What areas of truth do "mysteries" deal with?
17. How does the term "knowledge" differ from the term "mysteries" in 1 Corinthians 13:2?
18. Is it possible for us to "understand all mysteries, and all knowledge"? Support your answer.
19. What does knowledge without love accomplish? What happens when people have love without knowledge? What does Philippians 1:9 say about love and knowledge? Of the two, which is superior?
20. What is the gift of faith? Explain the concept of faith moving mountains.
21. Love is self-sacrifice, but is all self-sacrifice love? Explain.
22. What light is shed on the meaning of 1 Corinthians 13:3a by understanding the meaning of the Greek word for "feed"?

23. What are some of the improper motives behind many of the benevolent acts that people are involved in? What is the only proper motive?
24. What are the possible interpretations of the phrase "give my body to be burned" in 1 Corinthians 13:3b? Which one is the most likely? Why?
25. What's the best way to sum up 1 Corinthians 13:1-3?
26. Fill in the following equation: Life - Love = _____
27. According to Revelation 2:2-4, what was praiseworthy about the church at Ephesus? However, what was their downfall?

Pondering the Principles

1. What did Jesus mean when He told us to love our enemies in Matthew 5:44? How is this possible? Why are we to love our enemies, according to verse 45? Can you think of someone who you would consider your enemy? Take a moment and consider how you can do good to them through an act of self-sacrificial service. Then, commit yourself to do it, making sure your motive is love and your power is the Spirit of God.
2. Is complete agreement necessary for unity in the body of Christ? What is the key to unity? Is there a particular brother or sister in Christ whom you find yourself always disagreeing with, or them always disagreeing with you? If so, memorize and meditate on Philippians 2:3-4, and ask God to show you how to love him or her in practical ways.
3. If you teach--whether it be a Sunday school class, a home Bible study, or a one-on-one discipleship group--ask yourself the following questions: Do you love those that you teach? When was the last time you made a sacrifice on their behalf? What was it? How does God view your teaching if it is not motivated by love? Spend some time with the Lord in prayer to determine your real motive for teaching. If it isn't love, confess it to God, examine your heart for any other unconfessed sin and confess them to God, and then allow the Holy Spirit to enable you to exercise your spiritual gift with His love.
4. Read the following verses: Hosea 4:6, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 1:5, Ephesians 1:17-18, Colossians 1:9, 2 Peter 1:5; 3:18. Is knowledge important in the life of a Christian? Why? According to 1 Corinthians 8:1, what can knowledge produce? What will prevent this from happening (see Phil. 1:9)? According to 1 Corinthians 8:1 and 13:2, what is superior to knowledge? With all of that in mind, what should you do if you're on your way to a Bible study and you see someone who needs help changing a flat tire or someone who needs help pushing a car that's out of gas? Once you've determined what you should do, is that what you would do? Read Revelation 2:2-4 and evaluate whether or not you're like the Ephesian church--knowledge and good works without love. Now, commit yourself to live a life of love...a life of self-sacrificial service in the power of God.
5. Explain the following statement: Love is self-sacrifice, but all self-sacrifice is not necessarily love. Have you ever given to the poor and needy, or even given to the church with one of the following reasons: a sense of obligation, peer pressure, legalism, to pacify a guilty conscience, to get recognition, to earn God's favor. What is the only proper motive for giving? What does God think of your sacrificial act or your gift if your motives are wrong? What are some practical ways to keep your motives pure when you give to the Lord or to others?

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