

LEARNING TO LOVE GOD'S WAY

Without Love, It's All Hot Air

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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WATCH/ LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/without-love-its-all-just-hot-air/>

This morning's question is how do we get past the idea of love as something we simply talk about? A Peanuts cartoon has Snoopy on his roof, typing a letter: "Dear sweetheart, I think of you constantly. I think of you constantly every other week or so." Mere words are cheap! And a second question follows. How do we separate how culture uses the word love and how followers of Jesus understand it? Let's begin there.

The word Paul uses for love, *agape*, is one of many Greek words for love. In English we have one word for how we feel about romantic passion, apple pie, Grandma, the Chiefs, God and others. But in Paul's day, this word *agape* hadn't been used much, so followers of Jesus claimed it and filled it with special meaning. It is used as a verb 130 times in the New Testament and 120 times as a noun.

Here are some attempts at definitions of love (*agape*). It is a commitment to and concern for the wellbeing of others [Common English Study Bible, NT, p. 327]. It is endless goodwill and appreciation, a self-giving and devotion to the other's wellbeing" [Dr. William Coble]. Notice that love involves the will, not emotions, though emotions may follow in obedience. And it is outward-focused. Though the words "Jesus Christ" or "Cross" are not mentioned in this chapter, our Savior radically redefined love in Jesus' life and death. By the way, if you are not yet a believer, this is reason enough to give your life to Christ. He can become God loving and living through you!

Now I know you usually hear this chapter read at weddings, but there is nothing about romantic love here. It is not "nice" and "pretty" and it is not a first-century all Hallmark card! Paul isn't trying to get the Corinthians to feel some way; he is trying to get them to act a certain way, to behave like Jesus followers. This chapter is tucked between two chapters that talk about spiritual gifts (preaching, serving, administration). People were fussing about who was most important. Paul reminds them that love is the greatest gift. Love is about very different people learning to get along. Love is the lubricant that keeps all these gifts moving together and not grinding.

In v. 1, Paul says even if we have the gift of ecstatic utterance and don't have love, we're like a noisy, clanging cymbal. Noisy gongs were extremely common in Corinth and other cities. The pagan temples would use them in worship. But here is another interesting note. Since the time of Plato, windbag orators who were considered all talk and no action were called "gongs." (Like our old "Gong Show"?). It meant hollow, empty.

Paul goes on in v. 2. Even if you can preach or understand all mysteries, without love, nothing. Is it possible to do good things for others and not love them? Yes! Give your possessions and still not love? Yes. We can do heroic, sacrificial things and not really love God or others. But even small things done in love become powerful. An elderly man in China regularly walked several miles to a Christian clinic to receive his heart medicine. Later, the Communists put a clinic in his village, but he continued to walk the many miles to the one run by believers. When asked why, he replied, "Medicine given in love tastes better."

And give our body to be burned and not love? Of course. Sometimes, terrorists and false teachers die for their cause but never love. There is an old adage that rings so very true: People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. If you want to measure your spiritual commitment, don't look at how often you read your Bible, how much money you give or how many good civic projects you've been involved in. No. Instead, just ask yourself a simple question. Do people consider you a loving person? Do you love others?

Pastor Adam Hamilton shares that he had preached a sermon on the church's purpose, its reason to exist. A lay leader came up to him and said, "In my ministry area we had become cranky with one another, and we were losing our joy. We lost sight of why we were doing this. Your sermon rekindled our passion. I remember now why we were doing it" [*Unleashing the Word*, pp. 108-109].

Perhaps love is the missing piece in your restless heart. The missing ingredient in your Christian journey. Maybe this is what is missing in your Christian service. You're doing all the right things. But you're not loving or letting God love through you. Why not open your heart?