

The Great of These...
Series: The Great of These...
1 Corinthians 13:1-3,13
April 29, 2018

Well, this has been a wonderful day. The chorus is true: Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

I'm a big fan of listening to music. Whether it is in the car or when I am working or on the treadmill, I love to listen to music. And I would say THE most dominate theme in songs is love. We sing about love all the time.

- The Beatles sang that it was all you need and you can't buy it.
- Elvis couldn't help falling in love.
- Bon Jovi had a girlfriend so bad that he sang "You Give Love a Bad Name", while Paul Simon's girl "Loves Me Like a Rock." I'm not exactly sure what that means.
- Queen sang "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" while Stevie Wonder just called to say I love you.
- Pat Benatar says "Love is a Battlefield" and David Cassidy sang "I Think I Love You."

I think you've got the point. We sing a lot about love. But for all the songs about love, all the novels, the paintings, the poems, none describes love more fully, more clearly, than one single chapter in the Bible.

Today, we are beginning a series looking at God's definition and design for love. Today, we will start with the series theme, the "Greatest of These..." I invite you to turn to page 7 in your bulletin.

This morning, I want us to look at just a few verses of 1 Corinthians 13, often called "The Love Chapter."

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.¹

In the Greek language, there are three words which are all translated in our one word love. There is the word *eros*. That is the word for passion, the word used for lust. Sex would be our word for it today. This word does not occur in the New Testament at all.

Then there is the word *phileo*, which means "affection." We find that root in our words Philadelphia and philanthropist. It means a love of human kind, a love of a sister or a brother. It means human love at its highest. It is a noble love.

The third word is *agape* and it is the highest word for love in the New Testament. It means "divine love." It is more than love in the emotion; it is love in the will. It is love that chooses its object. It is a definition of God, for God is love.²

And that's the word that is used in this passage: *agape* kind of love. And Paul describes 7 ways that love is greater.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 13 (NIV)

² Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

First, Love is greater than great proclamation.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:1:

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...*³

In the previous chapter, Paul had spoken about spiritual gifts, a subject the people of the church of Corinth were quite familiar with, and very boastful of their possession. Gifts of prophecy, of healing, and of the ability to speak in unknown tongues or languages; these were dramatic to say the least. But no matter how impressive it was to speak such lofty things as the language of angels, without love – the love of God and of others for His sake – we are no better before God than the sounding instruments of brass used in the worship of some of the heathen gods, or a tinkling cymbal, two pieces of hollow brass, which, being struck together, made a tinkling, but very little variety of sound.

Paul is telling us that we can say very lofty things, words that will enlighten the mind and fill the heart, but no matter how grand they are, if they are spoken without love, they are simply and completely annoying.

What are you saying within your home, amongst your family, your children, your spouse, your grandchildren? Are they words of compassion, tenderness, love? Does your family know love through your words? If not, no amount of supposed faith or Christian practice will ever get through. Your words will be completely annoying.

Second, Love is greater than great prophecy.

Wouldn't it be awesome to be able to tell the future:

- To predict the outcome of the Reds game today (they'll lose).
- To pick the stock that's going to go up 20% (like buying Apple way back when).
- To knowing exactly what your wife is thinking (now that would be a miracle).

Remember the movie "Back to the Future Part II"? Marty McFly, played by Michael J. Fox, travels to the future. While there, he purchases an almanac containing the results of major sporting events from 1950 to 2000. He thinks he will be able to get rich from knowing those outcomes. Unfortunately, the bad guy in the movies, Biff, steals the almanac and carries out the plan, with devastating results.

Paul wrote, "If I have the gift of prophecy..."⁴ In the New Testament, the gift of prophecy could be the predicting of the future, but it could also mean giving the message of God, whether it be preached by a preacher or taught by a teacher. To be a preacher or a predictor of the future carried much prestige in Corinth, and it enabled one to be a great influence and help for the church. However, without love, great words from the pulpit or in the proclamation of the Gospel are in vain. It doesn't matter how much you try to reach your family or your friends for Christ; if it is without God's kind of love, everything you do is nothingness.

Third, Love is greater than great perception.

I have terrible perception when it comes to things my wife loves. I don't get flowers; I really don't. Cut flowers do not touch my emotions. A bush or a tree blooming, that's different for me. But a bundle of flowers; I don't ever say, "Aren't those pretty?" Thank God for Mark Heistand and the Germantown Lions Club. You guys are great.

Same with jewelry. There will be a jewelry commercial on TV and Myra will say, "Isn't that pretty?" And I'm like, "I don't know."

³ 1 Corinthians 13:1a (NIV)

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:2a (NIV)

I just don't get flowers or jewelry. But you know what Myra says? "You don't have to get flowers and jewelry; you just have to get flowers and jewelry."

Paul says, "If I... can fathom all mysteries..."⁵ Who here wouldn't love the gift to perceive Divine revelation, to know what God's plan is? Probably all of us.

For 10 years, I was in Youth Ministry, and it was young people who would love to know God's plan for their lives: where should they go to college, what should they do for a living, who would be their spouse, where would they live? Who wouldn't want those answers?

But Paul says that perception is of no value when there is no love.

Fourth, Love is greater than great philosophy.

Verse 2 reads:

*If I have... all knowledge...*⁶

I graduated 9th in my high school class of 360. I consider myself a fairly smart guy. I was always very good in Math, in finances. I taught myself how to use those first IBM computers (I actually read the DOS book). I taught myself to play the piano. I learned how to fly at age 39 and got my instrument rating at age 54, and I'm here to tell you that was hard work.

So I figure that the old noddle works pretty well up there. But put some legal document in front of me and it's as if I'm trying to read Swahili. I can't understand it. It is completely foreign to me.

Paul tells us that it doesn't matter how smart you are. You may go to school and get enough degrees to paper your office walls, but lack of love will void them all.

Fifth, Love is greater than great power.

When Myra and I fly to West Virginia, we land at an airport that is quite literally on top of a mountain. That's right. The people there decided, "Amongst all our hills, this is where we are going to build our airport." So they bulldozed the top of this mountain right off. They took off enough to build a 4,200' runway. But if you have a problem and can't stop on the runway, down you go, right off the mountain.

Paul says:

*if I have a faith that can move mountains...*⁷

It takes great power to remove mountains. To have that kind of faith to gain that kind of power will put you into a special category spiritually. But without love, you will not profit.

Sixth, Love is greater than great philanthropy.

Paul writes in verse 3:

*If I give all I possess to the poor...*⁸

A 2015 article listed the top 20 philanthropists in the world. Fifth on the list was Charles Francis Feeney. Known as the "James Bond of philanthropy," this retail magnate is on a mission to give away his entire fortune — and with his current net worth down to \$1.5 million, it seems he's succeeded. In his life, he has given away \$6.3 billion.⁹

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:2b, (NIV)

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:2c, (NIV)

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:2d (NIV)

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:3a (NIV)

⁹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/the-20-most-generous-people-in-the-world-a6757046.html>

Can you imagine giving away all you possess? All your money, all your clothes, all your cars, your house, all your stuff, and giving it to the poor? What a tremendous thing.

But Paul says that this great sacrifice, without love, gains you nothing back.

Finally, Love is greater than great pain.

You probably don't remember the name Rachel Scott, but you remember what she did. On April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado, 2 senior students murdered 12 students and one teacher, and 21 additional people. One of those killed was Rachel Scott. She was confronted by the gunman and asked, "Are you a Christian?" She said, "Yes" and was killed for her faith.

Every time I hear that story, I wonder deep inside what I would have said. Could I have stood for my Lord? Those Christians who are being persecuted and murdered even today in areas controlled by Radical Islam, are an inspiration to so many.

Yet Paul says:

*If I... surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*¹⁰

Martyrdom is rightfully impressive and the burning is extremely painful. But lack of love will devalue your martyrdom so much so that you will receive no profit, no reward from it.

The rock band King's X sings, "It's love that holds it all together." Truly it is love that holds it all together. However, it doesn't matter what you say, what you think, what you do. Without love, it is annoying, meaningless, nothing.

Bell is no bell, unless you ring it

Song is no song, unless you sing it

Love is no love, unless you give it.

Most of you have seen the wonderful images from the Hubble Space Telescope. From the far reaches of space, we're able to see God's most breathtaking creations. Do you remember that in the beginning, Hubble was not the wonderful machine that it is today?

After lots of excitement, Hubble was launched in 1990 aboard Space Shuttle Discovery. Within weeks of the launch, the returned images indicated a serious problem with the optical system. Although the first images appeared to be sharper than those of ground-based telescopes, Hubble failed to achieve a sharp focus, and the best image quality obtained was drastically lower than expected. Analysis of the flawed images showed that the cause of the problem was that the primary mirror had been polished to the wrong shape. Though it was the most precisely figured optical mirror ever made, it was too flat by about 2,200 nanometers (or 87 microinches, less than the width of a human hair). This difference was catastrophic. Everything was blurry. Only a second trip to Hubble with new equipment would fix the nearsightedness.

The life without love is just like the early years of Hubble. It doesn't matter what you are looking at, it is out of focus without love.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:3b (NIV)