

Christian Love: Living It Out In Loveless Times

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Having worked for decades as a minister who also works in the musical instrument retail world, I have met and ministered to hundreds of people—all ages, cultures, vocations, and peculiarities—as working unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23). Through these daily encounters with plenty of people, God has shown me how to minister His love to the sometimes unloveable. Without boasting, I will say that my evangelism style has become raw and unapologetically real.

However, there is one type of customer that I have never been able to tame. In fact, when confronted by this untamed monster, I cower in the corner and call out for the monster's mamma. I'm talking, of course, about the three to five year olds that Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 19:14 to allow to come to Him. Praise God, except that these are the little ones that cascade into my store, grab a large stick, and begin smashing on every cymbal in sight. This is the war I fight and lose daily. Pray for me!

To hear a cymbal played dynamically, musically, and emotively by one of my jazz drummer heroes is to understand the gift of God through music. The sound informs and inspires as God intended. Likewise, our spiritual gifts should be music to the ears and hearts of our brothers and sisters in Christ, as we administer these gifts in humility and love. And when we speak of Christian love, we defer to Paul's upcoming description of a love like no other.

1 Corinthians 13:1

(KJV) Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become assounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

(NIV) If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

To speak in tongues via the Holy Spirit is a towering gift in the Body of Christ. In fact, in Paul's time this gift became a tool of condescension in the mouths of those proud and without humility or love. Listen here to the fruit of the Spirit that all possessors of spiritual gifts are to display in their walk with Jesus:

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

So, whether we are referring to heavenly tongues or national tongues (speaking in other languages untrained), this spiritual gift was causing division within the Corinthian church. God's people were puffed up with pride!

1 Corinthians 8:1

Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.

This kind of spiritual pride and arrogance Paul is pointing out here is like a small child indiscriminately pounding on cymbal or gong with a large stick. Ouch! There is a dividing phrase here that contrasts the beauty of the gift of tongues, and the obnoxious result of the gift within the Body of Christ when it is used without love. Paul is advancing us toward a Biblical understanding of agape love—love unconditional—and its superiority over everything, even spiritual gifts.

But do not have love.

Philippians 2:3

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,

Dear Christian, be sure to put others first, value their ministries first, be a cheerleader! God wants to work in us and through our membership in the Body. He cannot do so with a critical spirit, a controlling heart, or a life void of love—these are but mere logjams to His work in the Body of Christ.

*QUESTION FOR MEDITATION: Is it a struggle for you to put others and their ministries ahead of your own? If so, why do you think this is a battle? What might change your heart in this area?

*STUDY POINT: Find three significant Biblical figures who put others ahead of themselves. Write out a passage for each where they demonstrate this agape love.

Remember this:

1Peter 5:6-7

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

1 Corinthians 13:2

(KJV) And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

(NIV) 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 do not have love, I am nothing.

This is the same pattern of proof as Paul uses in the previous verse. Inserted here are the gifts of prophecy, discernment, knowledge, extreme faith. Impressive? Profoundly spiritual? Not without love!

1 Corinthians 13:3

(KJV) And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

(NIV) If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

How about goodwill to the poor, or martyrdom? Absolutely, this person has captured the heart of God. Right?

Not without love.

*QUESTION FOR MEDITATION: Why do you think love is such an important and emphasized component regarding the use of spiritual gifts? Isn't it enough to just use what God has given us?

*STUDY POINT: Find three examples in the Bible where spiritual gifts or responsibilities were misused? What was the outcome? What can we learn about God from these examples?

As we are going to see, Paul does not reduce this divine love to an academic definition. No, agape love (agapao) displays itself in a person who is God's child through Jesus—filled with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Paul will give us characteristics of a person filled with agape, divine love. These characteristics stand in sharp contrast to eros love (lust), and phileo love (affection), both common in our secular world.

In closing for this week's teaching, we celebrate each other's God-given gifts to His glory in the Body of Christ. We thank Him for a reason to get up in the morning, a purpose and plan for every day. We marvel at all the supernatural works He is doing in us and through us.

But not without love.

~ Reverend Darren McClelland