



You Have a Gift!  
For a More Excellent Way  
1 Corinthians 12:31 – 13:13  
October 9, 2005

“What does love mean?” That was the question that a group of professionals posed to a group of 4-8 year olds. “What does love mean?”

- Bobby, age 7, said, “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.”
- Nikka, age 6, said, “If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend who you hate.”
- Jessica, age 8, said, “You really shouldn’t say ‘I love you’ unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.”
- Karen, age 7, said, “When you love somebody, your eyelashes go up and down and little stars come out of you.”
- Billy, age 4, said, “When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.”

1 Corinthians 13 is Paul’s answer to the question “What does love mean?” What does love mean? Paul would answer, “Love means...you use your spiritual gift to build up instead of to tear down.” Without love, spiritual powers do little toward building up a person or a church or a community. Without love, spiritual gifts like tongues, prophecy, knowledge, and giving amount to nothing. Listen again as Paul makes this first point to the church in Corinth, and notice how he does it with “I” statements:

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.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

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.

Notice how Paul takes care not to put his readers on the spot. Paul does not say, “If you give away all but have not love, you are nothing.” That would have just made his hearers mad. Instead, Paul says, “If I ...” Paul invites them to imagine what he would be like if

he exercised his considerable gifts and powers without love. Thus, Paul gives his readers room to take a good look at themselves and their own behavior.

The truth was, the Corinthians in that church were too spiritual and too preachy and too smart and too rich for their own good. They were incredibly gifted, but they didn't use their gifts for each other. Instead of being a team together, they were a collection of *prima donnas*. You've seen this in baseball or football or soccer. The members of a team are full of talent, yet refuse to put their egos and their abilities at the service of the team. So each of them is out there on the field trying to show off in his own little area. Meanwhile, the other team, with much less raw ability, but with a sense of teamwork and even a sense of -- shall I say it -- love for each other, kicks the butts of those *prima donnas* all over the field.

That's how it was in the church at Corinth. Some members were very gifted in spirituality. Their worship was ecstatic and heavenly. But they began to feel like they were more spiritual than the rest. Other members were very gifted in preaching, with powerful messages. But they began to feel like they were the whole show. Other members were very gifted in biblical knowledge, some having studied with Paul, some having studied with Apollos, some having studied with Peter. But they began to argue among themselves about who was the best scholar. (1 Cor. 1:12) And yet other members were gifted with the power of giving, and some of those had a lot of wealth to give. But on Sundays when they brought their impressive covered dishes to the love feast and communion service, they would forget to wait for the poorer members, and they would eat it all and let their brothers go hungry at the Lord's table. (1 Cor. 11:21)

Those Corinthians had a lot, but they didn't have love. And without love, all their great gifts amounted to nothing. Just a few generations later, a great preacher named John Chrysostom (John "golden-mouth") remarked that if you don't have love, you are not just useless, you are positively a nuisance. It's like that old TV commercial: at a stop light a respectable lady pulls up in her respectable Oldsmobile. Then a Hell's Angel pulls up on his Harley. He looks at the tailpipe of the Olds, which is so out of tune that it's belching smoke, and he says to the lady, "Ma'am, you're a menace to society." When our spiritual gifts are not tuned with love, we're a menace to society.

It happens all the time in church: people with God-given spiritual gifts, but without love. When they try to use their gifts, they don't build anybody up, they just tear down. In fact, they are a menace to society and to the church.

There was once a man with the gift of giving. He came to the pastor with a big check. The man said, "I really don't trust any of the tacky people in this church to spend this money in good taste, so I want you to let this sit in a special fund for me, and when I see what I want to spend this on, I'll let you know. The pastor, blinded by the dollar signs and zeros, made a big mistake, and accepted the check. But the man never did say what to do with the money to his dying day. The pastor simply returned that money to the estate. That gift was made without love, and was useless.

Today there are many gifted and powerful preachers. But you and I have seen what can happen when a prophet speaks without love. His words don't build up, but with super-piety and sarcasm and innuendo, his gift of words serves only to humiliate and divide and tear down.

In church there are a lot of people with the gift of knowledge. But take away love from such a person and you end up with a know-it-all, an irritating know-it-all. There once was a mission trip to an overseas project, and on that mission team was not one know-it-all, but two know-it-alls, and they succeeded in irritating each other all the way there and all the way back!

Our individual skills and gifts will not build up the church, and may even tear it down, unless we employ our gifts and skills in love. The difference between a spiritual gift that irritates and tears down and a spiritual gift that encourages and builds up...is love.

In the movie "Forrest Gump" (which I quote only once a month), there is a tender scene when Forrest tells his beloved Jennie, "I know what love is." Well, Paul knows what love is. In the middle of his "Love Chapter," in verses 4-7, notice how Paul says both what love is, and what love is not. First, he describes what love is:

Love is patient; love is kind ...

Then Paul describes what love is not:

...love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Then Paul returns back to what love is:

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

(Now let me be sure and say that if you are in an abusive relationship, this scripture is NOT saying that you have to endure that abuse. If you think it does, I want you to come see me and we'll talk about it, and make sure you are safe.)

But back to this central part of the "Love Chapter." Love bears all things. Love overlooks slights. Love gives the benefit of the doubt. Love believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

What is love? What does love look like? It looks just like Jesus, for he was all these things that Paul describes. And what else does love look like? It looks like the church, when the church is at its best. One of the earliest recorded comments made about the church after the New Testament was the exclamation, "See how these Christians love one another!" The Greco-Roman world was very curious about these small house

churches that were growing in every city. They were the only places in the Empire where Jew and Greek, slave and free, men and women treated each other with genuine equality and affection. Each member had been changed by the experience of being totally loved by the ultimate power in the universe. The warm love of Christ melted their fear and guilt and self-centeredness. The transforming love of Christ forged a new kind of community in which every member was valued, and every member put his or her own gifts and powers to work for the good of all. That is what love is, says Paul.

And then Paul concludes as he began this chapter, by reminding the Corinthians that, without love, gifts of the Spirit amount to nothing and will come to an end:

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. (1 Cor. 13:8)

After all, even these powerful spiritual gifts that God gives us now are partial and incomplete compared to what will come when we are face to face with God. We are all on a spiritual journey, all of us maturing on the way. Sometimes on that way we think we get a glimpse of God's shadow, but only a dim glimpse. But some day, it won't be the shadow, "but the reality of the majesty and eternity of God shall begin to shine and to reveal itself unveiled before our eyes." (Ambrose) Some day, when all is complete, and we are indeed face to face with God, the only thing that will be left, the only thing that will matter, will be love.

If that will be the only thing that will matter then, why don't we start living like that's the only thing that matters now? It doesn't matter what kind of spiritual gift God has given you – prophesy or compassion or giving or wisdom. All that matters is that you employ that gift in love for others.

If you do that, then you will have found the more excellent way, you will know God's purpose for your life, and you will live in that assurance. If you do that, then your community and your church will be transformed from a conglomeration of individuals proud of individual gifts – into a community of brothers and sisters who use their gifts to build each other up in love.

-- Douglas E. Murray