

## **Pursue Love!**

Please turn with me to 1 Corinthians 13. Paul's occasion for writing 1 Corinthians is that the Corinthian church was being divided by factions, and quarreling. One commentary that I read on 1 Corinthians points out that for Paul love is the positive counterpart to the divisions that were in Corinth. It was common thing at the time to use the concept of love to argue against these kinds of divisions. This is what we have here in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul inserts 1 Corinthians 13 in midst of his argument in 1 Corinthians as a digression from his previous argument to use it as a deliberative argument against the divisions that were in the Corinthian church. Paul's answer to the divisiveness of the Corinthian church is for them to pursue love because that is what God commands us to do. Paul's answer to the divisions in Corinth will help us to understand how we are to pursue love.

Now let's read what God's word has to say to us here in 1 Corinthians 13. 1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass

away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

[Prayer before Sermon]

“Maybe I killed someone. How do you know I’m not going to murder you?” Those are the words of Jean Valjean to Bishop Myriel as he sat around the table eating. Valjean was a convict who had spent time in prison for stealing food. One night Valjean is stealing from the bishop. As he is stealing some silverware the bishop begins walking in his night gown down the hall to the room where Jean Valjean is. He asks, “is anybody there?” Valjean hears him and hides. The bishop then enters the room and walks over to the table where Valjean was collecting the silverware that he was stealing. The bishop turns around and Jean Valjean comes out of the dark, faces the bishop and then strikes him knocking him to the floor. The next day Jean Valjean is caught and is brought to the bishop. The bishop shows love to Valjean by defending him and giving him some candlesticks in addition to what he sold. Valjean as a result of the bishop obeying God’s command to love, is changed by the love which the bishop demonstrated to him and goes on to do many good deeds which include saving a man’s life. We all know what it is like to be changed by love. We experienced this ourselves when we became Christians. We all strive to love people. We should love like the Bishop did Valjean. However, often times we fail

to love and do not model the essence of Christian spirituality. This is the problem that Paul encountered and addresses in 1 Corinthians 13. What we can learn from this chapter is that God's word commands us to love.

In this passage from 1 Corinthians love is the essence of Christian spirituality because love is to be sought above everything else, even above hope and faith. Love is what characterizes the christian. Paul here is encouraging the Corinthians to pursue love as a means of putting away the divisions in the church there at Corinth. So when I talk of pursuing love here I mean what Paul means, I mean that we need seek love as a way of putting away things that are divisive in the church. There are three ways in which we are commanded by God to love in this passage. We must put away pride, put others first, and put preeminence on love.

First we will see that we must put away pride. One amazing experience that strikingly portrays how we should put away pride is seen in an experience that I once had while evangelizing. At the time I was doing my undergraduate work at Oklahoma Baptist University. Some friends and I were going out frequently to build relationships with homeless people outside the local Salvation Army and to share Christ with them. On one certain occasion I encountered a middle aged man with scraggily facial hair. I struck up a conversation with him and at some point in the conversation this man claimed that he had never sinned at all. I was amazed that he could say such a thing. So I thought he might have misunderstood me somewhere and I asked him again. He confirmed that the claim to sinlessness was correct. Amazed that he could be so prideful I told him that I had never met anyone who hadn't sinned and asked him if he would go through the ten commandments with me to verify his claim. I went through all ten commandments and on every one he denied that he had every broken it. Finally, I got him to

admit that he sinned because he had committed a sin of omission. We all have a tendency to be prideful in the way we talk. We may not claim to be perfect like the man with scraggly facial hair but we need to put away pride.

We will see three times when we are to put away pride. First, we put away pride when we are prideful in our speech. In verse 1 Paul contrasts speaking in tongues with having love. It is not clear what this speaking in tongues is. The reference to speaking in the language of men and angels may be referring to the eloquence of some people who spoke using rhetoric. Some people have been referenced to speaking in this way during that time. A word search on the word here used for tongues, reveals that it here refers to ecstatic speech and always refers to the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians. What these interpretations help us to see is that Paul here in verse 1 seems to be referencing eloquence of speech as well as the gift of tongues. Whether a person speaks eloquently or whether a person actually speaks in an ecstatic heavenly language he is nothing if he does not have love. As a noisy gong or clanging cymbal makes an empty meaningless sound, so does all of a person's gifts which are devoid of love. There is no spiritual significance to our eloquence of speech, we must have love.

Second, we are also to put away our pride when we are prideful of our gifts. In verse 2 Paul confronts the Corinthians who are prideful about their spiritual gifts. Some think that they can understand all mysteries. Paul does not think this is the case because we see as through a glass darkly (v. 12), yet assuming that this is true for the sake of argument, even if we possess this it is nothing if we do not have love. The gift of faith which produces miracles is also meaningless apart from love. Here in verse 2 Paul says that even the gift of prophecy which is the gift to be most sought after as Paul says in 14:1, is nothing apart from love. Not only are

these gifts of no value apart from love, but we are not either. One commentator I read notes , “Paul’s conclusion is even more shattering: not only are the spiritual gifts exercised without love of no value, but, says Paul, “I am nothing”-”spiritually a cipher.”

Third, we need to put away pride when we are prideful of our good deeds. We see this in verse 3. Paul is not content to just stop at confronting the Corinthians pride concerning spiritual gifts, but even goes beyond that in verse 3 to confront pride of good deeds when he says, “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” Our good deeds do not carry any significance and value if we do not have love. It does not matter whether one gives away all their wealth, or if they sacrifice their own life and become a martyr all good deeds which we can do are nothing and of no significance if we do not possess love.

We can often times take pride in our eloquence of speech. In ministry this may be particularly hard for us, because we may be tempted to be prideful of how well we are able to preach. We may be tempted to be prideful in our gifts. Maybe we are prideful in our gifts as teachers, maybe as preachers, or maybe we are prideful in our gift of evangelism. Perhaps some of us struggle with being proud of our good deeds. We may boast of our deeds to get recognition. Maybe we are prideful of our good deeds because it feeds our pride. We may be prideful about our humanitarian works such as trying to relieve poverty and feeding the poor, but without love these mean nothing. Whatever we are proud of out of love to God we must put away all pride and pursue love. If we love, pride must be put away.

A second way God commands us to love in this passage is seen in that we must put others first. The word that Paul uses for love here is *agapē*. *Agapē* here denotes benevolence. It is the

act of putting first the people we come in contact with. One commentator I read said, "Agapē is an attitude of radical and completely selfless love for others, which cannot be readily combined with concepts of rights or fairness, both of which imply that the person has certain legitimate claims *for* himself. Agapē, by contrast, requires that in his relation to others a person goes the whole way in their direction." That love consists in putting others first can also be seen in the characteristics by which it is described here in verses 4-7. To love is to be kind. Love does not insist on one's own way. Love does not rejoice in wrong doing to other people. Love believes and hopes the best of a person.

How we need to put others first can be seen in the life of William Carey. Carey lived in a time that was dispassionate about missions. Carey put away the pride of his age by writing a book calling people to love others by going to evangelize the unreached people of the world. Carey was confronted by a guy who objected, "Young man, sit down! You are an enthusiast. When God wishes to convert the heathen he will do it without consulting you or me." Because Carey put others first he combated this mentality by writing a book with the colorful title "An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens." In this book Carey argued that Christians are to love others by sharing Christ with them. Carey struggled with much opposition from people. The struggle could be intense but he was successful in establishing a mission agency and going to reach people for Christ because he put others first.

We are called to put others first like William Carey did. Like Carey we should be kind to other people. If we love, we will not think so much of fairness as how we may express love to people. We will not rejoice in wrongdoing. Like Carey had in mind the best interest of the

unreached so also will we always have other people's best interest in mind if we love. We will hope and think the best of the people around us if we love. If we put others first, we will not only love them as individuals but also love good of all people corporately as well by taking interest in doing what's best for society and the body of Christ even when it may not be what is best for me. To love people individually and not take any interest take in the common good or the body of Christ is not to love as verses 4-7 here calls us to. Therefore, when we love others we must love the common good of all people and the body of Christ as a whole.

Finally, we see that God commands us to love by the fact that we must put preeminence on love. In verses 8-13 Paul discusses the preeminence of love. Paul here confronts the Corinthians misplaced values. They valued prophecy, they valued partial gifts for finality. They thought they had all knowledge while in fact we only see through a mirror dimly. The Corinthians therefore needed to put away these childish things and pursue love. Everything which we may pursue will not last except for love, hope, and faith, but love is preeminent. Love never ends. Love will last forever.

In "The Ultimate Gift" Drew Fuller plays the role of Jason Stevens, a billionaire who has never had to work. Jason experiences the death of his grandfather "Red" Stevens. Red left the biggest portion of the inheritance to Jason. Jason is expecting money, however, Red leaves Jason different gifts to make him into a better person such as the gift of work and the gift of giving. Through this process Jason changes and learns that he has put preeminence on that which is temporal and does not last. He finds something more, friendship and love.

Like Jason often times put what has no lasting value over that which does. That is what Paul is saying here in 1 Corinthians, since, it is love that lasts we should pursue love above all else. In the strength that God provides we should pursue love above spiritual gifts such as prophecy and knowledge. We should put away the childish thing of seeking after that which does not last. Even when when are pursuing good things such as hope and faith we still miss the

mark if we do not love. Out of love to God we must take care to put preeminence on pursuing love above all else.

In this chapter we learn how God commands us to love. We must take care to always model Christian spirituality by loving people. When we love, we cannot be prideful. If we have love we will put away our pride of speech, our pride in our gifts, and our pride in our good deeds. By the grace of God we will be able to put away our pride, put others first, and put preeminence on love. God's enabling grace can be seen in the example of St. Francis of Assisi. During the fifth crusade in the middle ages. St. Francis of Assisi put preeminence on love when he resisted the violence of the crusades by pleading with the Christian commander Cardinal Pelagius to stop the fighting. However, Pelagius refused. Filled with love for the 'enemy' that was being fought against. St. Francis took along a companion to go to the 'enemy', the Sultan of Egypt, unarmed. They were captured, beaten, and then dragged before the Sultan. The Sultan asked him by whom and why he had been sent. St. Francis replied that he had been sent by God and not by humans to proclaim the way of salvation and the truth of the gospel. The Sultan loving St. Francis' enthusiasm listened to him. St. Francis presented the gospel but was unsuccessful in converting the Sultan. Let us follow the example of St. Francis. Let us put away our pride. Let us love others. In the grace God provides let us pursue love!