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### **The Pre-eminence of Love**

#### **I Corinthians 13:1-13**

“If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

These were great words long before they were famous words.

They are the words of a great man,

the words of a man who had probed his own psyche with rigorous depth.

Here was a man who had done great things, who had weathered great hardships,

endured great tortures, who had made great sacrifices,

who had offered great stewardship, who had given great service unto God.

Yet as Paul has examined the character of his own faith, he has sensed with great profundity

that all of his sacrifices, all of his acts of stewardship, all of his acts of courage and charity,

are useless if they are not rooted in and oriented toward the cause of God’s love.

If his faith is ever not an expression of God’s love, then, Paul admits, “I gain nothing.”

“If I deliver my body to be burned, if I have faith so as to remove mountains, if I give away all that I have, but I am not rooted in God’s love, then I have missed the Kingdom of God,” Paul confesses.

“For God is love, and all of my sacrifice, all of my stewardship, all of my service gains me nothing if I ever lose sight of the priority of God’s love.

Then I have lost contact with the Spirit of God and am at variance with the Kingdom of God.”

*For love is preeminent.*

These are the words of a great man. These are also the words of a desperate man.

Paul is trying to speak to a fractious congregation that has almost lost its way,

a congregation that has lost sight of the preeminence of love.

Paul is not trying here to compose a speech that will one day be read at weddings.

He is not aiming for a literary creation fit to be placarded on posters and hung in bedrooms.

He is writing to a congregation in turmoil, one arguing over which spiritual gift is most precious.

He is saying, Lo and behold, the most important gift is the gift right before your eyes.

Yes, it is the common gift of love.

Some of you are gifted with the ability to speak in tongues. That won’t hold you together!

Some of you may have extraordinary knowledge. Knowledge won’t hold you together!

Some of you may unravel every theological mystery on earth. That won’t hold you together!

Some of you may offer great acts of courage and charity. Not even these will bind you together!

Love is preeminent!

Love is rooted in the character of God. Love is the most powerful force on earth.

You ask me what is the most important gift, says Paul,

and I tell you it is the gift right before your eyes,

the gift God gives unto us all, the gift of love. Love is preeminent!

Paul is a great preacher, never greater than in this passage.

To express the preeminence of love is to state a truth that is lofty and sublime.

But a great preacher knows that he cannot leave a great truth lofty and sublime.

He must bring that great truth down to how the ideal is experienced in the real world.

And so he says, love as it is experienced in the nitty, gritty, world is patient and kind.

True love is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.

Love is not irritable or resentful, nor does it rejoice at wrong, but rather rejoices in right.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. Love never ends.”

Those are not lofty and sublime words!

Those are common, basic, ordinary words drawn from the living of ordinary life, and everyone can understand their meaning.  
Love is preeminent, yes, but in the real world *love is also selfless*.  
God's love as experienced in real life always has an incalculably selfless element.  
When Paul makes such statements as love is patient and kind, he uses ordinary language.  
Yet only someone rooted and nurtured by the Spirit of God, whose very character is love, can actually live in the fashion that Paul has described.

Not even the great theologians of our world truly grasp the radicality of the love of which Paul speaks. One of the most esteemed theologians of our day is a man named Martin Marty, an incredibly bright guy. Martin Marty once described a children's sermon gone bad. A young minister had the children spread out before him and talked of someone who had stolen a bicycle. The minister asked, "Do we still love the thief?" A kid piped up and said, "No! Not until he returns the bike!" Marty agreed, saying that to love and accept the thief before he makes restitution, before he returns the bike, would be to offer cheap and easy grace. Martin Marty is a brilliant man, but not even he has grasped the nature of the love of which Paul is speaking. I think of a Protestant Church of the Brethren during the time of Nazi Germany that split over the terrible question of "Do we take the loyalty oath to Hitler?" About half of the congregation did, and their lives during the war were relatively easy. But of the half the congregation that refused to take the oath, every single family lost at least one person to the gas chambers and the concentration camps. After the war, the two groups looked at each other, wondering, "Could we rejoin each other?" According to Martin Marty's reasoning, no, never. For how could one group make restitution to the other? How could those gassed and buried bodies be restored to the fellowship? On the one side there was cravenness and cowardice. On the other, there was courage, sacrifice and bitter loss. On the one side there was relative ease, on the other devastating pain. How could one side "give back the bike?" They could not! Yet to the amazement of onlookers, the two groups agreed to reconcile and merge. An astonished reporter interviewed the church leaders to discover, "How could this happen?" One of the elder members replied, "We simply came together. And then we were just one." That is a love grounded in the transcendent character and energy of God! That's the kind of love of which Paul speaks when he says, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

We as Christians believe a basic proposition: God is. And God is love. If God is God, then God is the most powerful force in the universe, which means that love is the most powerful force in the universe. Yet we often think of love as something weak, sentimental and powerless. We should have sense enough to realize that love is the most constructive force in the world. It is the only power that can consistently bind people together. When Abraham Lincoln was asked how he could reunite his war-torn country, he resorted to theological language: "With malice toward none and charity toward all." Napoleon Bonaparte, of all people, observed, "Do you know what amazes me more than all else? The impotence of force to organize anything. There are only two powers in the world: the spirit and the sword. In the long run, the sword will always be conquered by the spirit." Violence can repress and restrain. Hatred can coerce and destroy. But only love can bind people together as a lasting force. Only love can eternally motivate. I confess to you that for many years I thought Paul had marred his beautiful sermon.

I felt as if he had blemished his presentation by asserting,  
“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child,  
but when I became a man, I gave up childish ways.”  
Age, and maybe parenthood, has given me a different perspective.  
For any parent can tell you, the theme of a child’s life can be summed up in two words:  
“I want! I want! I want my way! I want my agenda met! I want my opinion honored. I want!”  
That is not the attitude of the mature Christian, whom Paul describes as one who  
“bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”  
The character of a person committed to God’s love cannot help but gain a certain beauty.  
The character of one who does not grow bitter in a bitter world glows with an infectious joy.  
The love of which Paul speaks overthrows the narrow moral calculus that seems to govern our world.  
I read of a black man who ran into a burning trailer that was flying a confederate flag.  
The moral calculus of the world says, “Let the people burn!”  
But he went to rescue them because with eyes of love he saw possibilities that others did not.  
When a man spots people in a downed aircraft and puts himself in peril, saving dozens of lives  
from drowning, but losing his own in the process, who among us can criticize him?  
Rather, we praise him because his action is rooted in the very nature of the universe.  
When someone loves those whom others would abandon, they force us to see creation with fresh eyes.  
Years ago, one of my seminary friends was standing on an interstate bridge, beside his stalled car.  
Another car, trying to stop and help, hit my friend’s car, jostling him,  
so that his infant slipped out of his arms, falling over the bridge.  
Without hesitation, my friend leaped over the bridge, too.  
Both fell to their deaths.  
But who could criticize his action, rooted as it was in the impulse of love?  
The love to which God calls us is a love that upsets the moral calculus that seems to govern our lives.

Yet Paul is no sentimentalist, even about love.  
He knows, our knowledge is imperfect, and our prophecy is imperfect; so, too is our love.  
We can injure and insult without intent.  
One of my pastor friends noted that he can walk into a room of two hundred people and speak  
to fifty of them, but if, in a moment of distraction, he walks by the fifty-first person without speaking,  
he might have wounded that person. He has injured without intent, because his love is imperfect.  
Everyone of us knew what he was talking about.  
I think of Charlie Brown (that great prophet!) who was trying to pay Lucy a compliment,  
but instead he botched it, so mangling his words that he enraged her instead.  
After her tongue lashing of him he walked away saying,  
“I remember once, about five years ago, I said the right thing.”  
Every parent who loves a child, every spouse who loves a spouse,  
every friend who loves a friend, every sibling who loves a sibling,  
knows of the imperfection of love,  
knows there are those times when even at our most loving we injure those about whom we care most.  
Even at our best-intentioned, we wound.  
Paul reminds us not to fret this fact overmuch.  
We see as through a glass darkly,  
but one day we shall see each other face to face.  
One day we will understand others’ love fully,  
and our attempts at loving others will be fully understood.

Some years ago I read of a young scuba diver who became disoriented while exploring caves in Florida. Realizing that  
he was hopelessly lost and soon to die, he used his remaining oxygen to etch  
on the cave wall that would hold his body a stark, simple message to family and friends: “I love you.”  
With his dying breaths, this young man realized that this statement ultimately was all that really mattered.

You want to know what are the greatest spiritual gifts? asked Paul.  
They are the common gifts! Faith! Hope! Love!  
Our culture's every popular song is about love,  
but we know very little about the love of which Paul speaks,  
for the love of which he speaks is a commitment,  
a commitment rooted in God, a commitment fueled by God.  
You want the gifts that are greatest? asks Paul.  
They are the common gifts that lie before your eyes, available to everyone.  
Faith, hope, and love – these abide.  
And the greatest of these is love.

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