

True Love

4afterEpiphany

Pastor Josh Frazee

1 Cor.12:31b-13:13

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

What is your motivation? Why do you do the things that you do?

As we heard earlier, there are a variety of spiritual gifts; and it is the Holy Spirit who distributes them as He deems fit. Yet even those who do not believe can sometimes, or even often, do things we might deem as good. Certainly an unbelieving fireman entering a burning building to rescue those trapped inside is a noble feat for the sake of those inside for whom he had entered. But what motivates such an act? For the fireman, it would not be the agape love of a believer.

There are many good things which can be done; and there are a variety of reasons to do them—but there is only one proper motivator: true love. That’s what we’ll be hearing about in our text from the epistle, Paul’s letter to the Corinthian believers.

Verse 1

“I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

Paul writes about using gifts of the tongue—various languages of men, and yes, even that of the angels—and gifts of the head and mind—understanding of mysteries and knowledge. These are indeed fine gifts to have. At St. John’s Beardstown, IL, it has been a blessing to the community for vicars to go who know both English and Spanish so that the Gospel may be advanced for those who speak only in either dialect, either English or Spanish. Knowledge can and does lend a hand to the proclamation in writing sermons, knowing how to deal with different kinds of people, and the like. Yes, even having faith can be of use in delivering the Gospel—but what kind of faith is Paul referring to here?

He writes of faith, but not saving faith. For he writes that in order for it to be saving faith, it requires love. So how does one have faith but not love? Where can we find an example of this? In Matthew chapter seven, Jesus speaks of those who have such faith. At judgment, they will say to Him, ““Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?”” And yet, Jesus will tell them that their motivation was not true love. “(T)hen I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.””

How are these people going to do those great things—even “so as to remove mountains”—but not have love? We are not told. What we are told is that we need true love. It must be our motivator, or else we are “nothing.”

Verse 2

“If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.”

Without true love, a person’s possessions are nothing, he or she him or herself is nothing, and their reward is nothing. But, with love, all three are treasures from God.

So what does it look like to have love? Paul gives us a picture in words of how it looks. The one who has love, true love, the agape love of Christ, is patient. That is, he or she knows how to long suffer. Lenski wrote about this in his commentary on 1 Corinthians. “In the Scriptures ‘long-suffering’ has to do with injurious persons and does not let their ignorant, mean, or malicious actions arouse the resentment and the anger which they deserve (Lenski, p.554).” When one has true love and begins to speak it and live it, there will come those who are ignorant to it—thinking that they have love but do not recognize it when it is right before them; those who are mean, and say mean things to the person who has true love; and those who do malicious acts toward the one with true love. Last week we heard how those in Jesus’ hometown acted maliciously toward Him, and who else has perfect true love than Jesus Himself—God among us?

One who has true love is also kind. But as Jesus pointed out in the Gospels, not just to those who are kind to you in return, but to everyone. Again, Lenski gives us a description: “He (that is Paul) does not picture love in ideal surroundings of friendship and affection where each individual embraces and kisses the other but in the hard surroundings of a bad world and a faulty church where distressing influences bring out the positive power and value of love (Lenski, p. 555).”

One with true love also does not envy after another’s gifts, even if that other has more of the same gift than what that one has. One with true love does not boast in the gifts he or she does have, either.

One with true love does not insist on his or her own way. True love looks to the benefit of others at all times, never to the benefit of self. It is the complete opposite of what happened in the Garden. Adam and Eve became so wrapped up in advancement of self that they insisted on eating from the tree from which they had been commanded not to eat.

One with love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. When one has the true agape love of Christ, he or she does not rejoice at wrongdoing but is instead grieved because it hurts the one doing it and makes God angry at the one doing it. Rather, the one having true agape love rejoices when he or she sees his or her neighbor receiving the Word of God and the neighbor displays actions befitting one who has received the truth of God’s Gospel.

Verse 3

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 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. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Having true love allows for you to endure all things. And again, having true love means having faith in true love. What is true love? It is the agape love that God showed to us at Calvary, sacrificing His own Son so that your sins may be paid for. You have sinned against God. You have sinned against your neighbor. Rather than showing love, you have shown hate to them all. Yet God delivered up His Son, Jesus Christ, for you.

Someday, these things will no longer be. “As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.” When Jesus Christ returns from heaven, from the throne room of God seated at His right hand, where God called Him for sacrificing Himself for you and for me—then the

perfect will be among us once more. Now, we know in part, but then we shall know fully—even as we are fully known today.

Today, faith, hope, and love are gifts which God has given to us on account of Jesus' sacrifice. We use each, but especially love, that agape true love we have been shown, to serve our neighbors, to the glory of God and for our neighbor's benefit. In Jesus' Name. Amen.