

7 – 1 = 0

Will True Love Please Stand Up – Part II

I Corinthians 13:1-3

Introduction

Of all the cities of ancient Greece that would have had a twisted view of love, it would be Corinth. Of all the churches that would be in need of teaching on the subject of true love, it would be these former adulterers and thieves and homosexuals and fornicators and swindlers who had come to faith and joined the church in Corinth.

These Corinthians had lived for their own lusts and their own pleasures. They had extorted and stolen from neighbors and employers and perhaps, each other.

Now, as believers, they are in the assembly where giving is better than receiving; serving is better than ruling. This would be a life-changing perspective.

They knew how to use people for their own advantage, but had to learn how to serve people. They knew how to have sexual relations with others, but had to learn purity outside of marriage and fidelity inside of marriage. They naturally followed the motivations of greed and self-advancement and could use people and manipulate relationships to get what they wanted, but knew nothing of the spiritual motivation of love.

This was not a problem with just the Christians in Corinth – it is a necessary perspective for every Christian in every culture, every century, and every church. We are all infected with the wrong kind of love; that is, self-love; self-promoting, self-advancing, self-appreciating, self-defending, self-enamored, self-increasing love; self-enhancing love.

Just watch a toddler in the nursery. Who taught him to pitch a fit when his toys are taken away? He

has gotten old enough to evidence *the* characteristic trait of human nature – selfishness.

This past week I went to the grocery store to grab some fruit and some vitamin enhanced bottled water and a couple bags of non-fattening chips and a dozen doughnuts – because I believe in balance. I noticed a mother who was somewhat haggard and worn out. Her two or three year old daughter happened to be standing up in the back of the buggy literally screaming at the top of her lungs. This little red haired girl was just having a meltdown. Her cute little face was as red as her hair. She was standing on the tiptoes of her little tennis shoes, white-knuckled, holding on to the edges of the grocery cart – and she was mad. If she had been bigger we would have all been dead – there would have been no survivors. And this bedraggled mother was saying over and over again, as nicely as she could, “No, you can’t have it . . . No you can’t have that.”

How about toddlers who come to church here? Do you think this is the solution – get them in church and they will act spiritual? Do you think that down in the toddler rooms there is rampant sharing going on? Do you think the toddlers are saying, “Here, I’ve got more than enough Cheerios, you have some.”?

Early on, we crave to get – we have to learn how to give. We want to be served – we have to learn how to serve.

We all, in fact, want to be loved and we might even have an idea of what that looks like, but we have to learn how to love. It is interesting though, that once we see the genuine item, we intuitively know it is true love. Even kids can spot the genuine item.

This week someone sent me several things children said regarding true love. I thought they were great! Let me read some of them.

Rebecca, age 8, said, “When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn’t bend down to paint her toenails anymore, so my grandfather does it for her – that’s love.”

Danny, age 7, said, “When my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him to make sure the taste is okay – that’s love.”

Chris, age 7, said, “Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he’s handsome.”

Elaine, age 5, said, “Love is when Mommy gives Daddy the best piece of chicken.”

I like the direction these are going, don’t you? These kids understand “agape”.

Karl does not get it. He said, “Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.”

Lauren said, “I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones.” She will catch on later.

Let me give one more.

Jessica, age 8, delivered a profound truth when she said, “You really shouldn’t say ‘I love you’ unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot, because people forget.”

The world has been trying to get it right for thousands of years now.

The Greeks focused on “storge,” or “family love”. This is natural love that comes from being in the same clan or family.

They emphasized the word “philia,” which is the love of mutual attraction. In our last session, I called it eHarmony love. I did not get any hate mail either – I was a little disappointed.

The down side of “philia” says, “I’ll love you if you love everything I love.” When this person says they love someone with this kind of love, they are really saying, “I love you because you’re so much like me.”

Another word that was heavily used was “eros,” which is erotic, stimulating, thunder and lightning feelings that temporarily intoxicate the senses. It should lead into the commitment of soul and mind and body, but the world never moves on. They cannot, since “agape” is at its core – divinely inspired and engineered commitment.

- “Storge” love says, “I love you because you are in my family.”
“Agape” says, “I love you and choose to treat you as a member of my family.”
- “Philia” can mean, “I love you because you are like me.”
“Agape” means, “I choose to love you even if you are unlike me.”
- “Eros” says, “I love you because you meet my needs and make my heart beat.”
“Agape” says, “I love you and commit my heart to meeting your needs.”

By the time Paul sent his first letter to the Corinthian church, they had become enamored with the public, miraculous, front-page news of Spirit-empowered demonstrations and they were actually embroiled over self-centered disputes and self-promoting disagreements.

These believers were actually imitating their self-centered culture around them. Even more dangerous, they were in the process of moving Corinth inside the church. They were bringing into the assembly their old way of life – in which they were first and everyone else came last; in which they mattered and no one else came close.

Paul puts on the brakes in his discussion on spiritual gifts and closes I Corinthians chapter 12 by saying, “Listen, let me tell you about a more excellent way to live and serve – it is with the foundation of selfless, servant-like, people-first, God’s glory most kind of loving.”

This is called “agape” – the love that makes up its mind to live and serve with love.

Divine Mathematics – Seven Qualities Add To Nothing Without Love

We cannot miss the fact that as I Corinthians chapter 13 opens, Paul begins by using himself as the example. Look at verse 1.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

In this paragraph, Paul will say, “Listen, if even one of Christ’s apostles has it all together, but doesn’t have ‘agape,’ he’s not accomplishing anything.”

Notice I Corinthians 13:2.

If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all

faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

In this paragraph, Paul is going to teach us something radical – we could call it divine mathematics. He will present the hypothetical possibility of adding seven amazing qualities of spiritual life and dynamic ministry. But without love, these seven qualities add up to nothing. Seven wonderful attributes minus love equals nothing.

This is the divine mathematical equation:

$$7 - 1 = 0!$$

Let us look at these qualities.

The first dynamic element is eloquence. Notice I Corinthians 13:1a again.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels . . .

Paul is no doubt referencing the gift of tongues. The Corinthians' enthusiasm over the supernatural, public, sensational, up-front, and in the spotlight gifts was leading them into prideful disorder.

One author referred to it as "charismatic chaos".

Paul immediately captures their attention by saying, "Listen, imagine that I was the world's most gifted tongues-speaker – that I could speak in all the tongues in the world."ⁱ

The word for tongues in this verse is "glossa," which gives us the word "glossary". It might be easier to understand Paul's meaning if we translate this, "languages".

In other words, "If I were fluent in all the languages of mankind, yet without love, I'd only be impressing myself. To the world, I'd be ineffective."

Next, Paul has them imagine even further,

If I speak with the [languages] of . . . angels .

..

Now, the Bible does not teach any kind of unique or special angelic language or dialect. In fact, throughout the record of scripture, whenever they speak to men or women, they always speak in the language of the person being addressed. They evidently have been given the ability to communicate the message of God in whatever language their hearer understands.ⁱⁱ

Paul is basically saying, "If I were given the supernatural ability of the angels to address mankind in whatever language they understand – I mean, if I were the superhero missionary who could show up in any country and before any people group with any

language, yet did not have love, I would be nothing more than,

. . . a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.

Your translation might read, "sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal". The "sounding brass" was a brass gong that was struck. The "tinkling cymbal" does not quite translate the noise of crashing, clanging cymbals.

Paul is referring to the percussion section of ancient music. These two instruments gave off noise, more than music.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is no such thing as a cymbal solo; there are no symphonies written for cymbals. However, they can be effective if they are timed and timely.

Paul says, "If you say and sing whatever you say and sing, even if you can do it in every known language on the planet, without love serving as the leading instrument, you're only making noise."

Paul is actually hinting at something more than just symbols in this verse. In the first century worship of Dionysus, the clanging of cymbals and the striking of gongs accompanied their ecstatic utterances as they reached their fever pitch of false worship.

I believe Paul is hinting that the church in Corinth is looking and sounding more like a pagan religion than the holy redeemed people of God.

Without love, communication becomes noisy confusion and contradiction.

A noisy cymbal never attracted anyone to the name of Christ. A noisy saint never edified anyone in the church.

Paul anticipates his audience saying, "You're right, Paul, anything we come up with saying needs to be said with the right spirit for it to be meaningful or fruitful, but if God gives you something to say, it really doesn't matter who you are or how you say it – it's God's words."

In other words, "Who cares how you say it. What does it matter except that you simply deliver it. Love doesn't matter!"

Paul says, "Oh, really?"

He then lists three gifts that involved revelation from God – the very truth of God.

Look at I Corinthians 13:2a again.

[Imagine] If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge...

Prophecy is the ability to publicly proclaim God's truth accurately and authoritatively. I agree with one

author who pointed out the two-fold aspect of prophecy – it can be revelation or reiteration.^{iv}

In other words, prophecy can be receiving from God new revelation – which I believe ceased with the completion of the canon of scripture – or it can be, as it has been for nearly 2,000 years – reiteration; that is, teaching/repeating what God has already said.

Paul is saying, “If I have the ability to both tell the future or receive new truth from God, or the ability to preach and teach what God has already revealed, yet do not love my students,” – notice at the end of verse 2 –

. . . I am [a zero].

Paul goes on, in verse 2, to add to prophecy, “all mysteries”. This is an understanding of God’s ways, yet unexplained. This is once hidden redemptive truth that is now revealed through scripture.

Paul adds to mysteries, “all knowledge”. In other words, “If I were a walking Bible encyclopedia that had the theological answers to any spiritual mystery or question; if I knew it all, yet lacked love, I would be a big zero.”

A full head with an empty heart adds up to nothing.^v

It is possible to know a lot about the facts of the Bible and very little about the heart of God.

Paul earlier emphasized this point, when he said, “Without love, communication becomes noisy confusion.”

Now, Paul is saying in principle form, “Sharing insight with others without showing interest in others is entirely ineffective.”

This is the reason the mark of the disciple was never knowledge.

Jesus did not say,

- “They will know you are My disciples by your IQ.” Or, “They will know you are My disciples by your SAT scores.” (Praise God for that, right?)
- “They will know you are My disciples by your insight.”
- “They will know you are My disciples by your knowledge of the future!”

Hey, we know the future. Have you ever thought about that? We know it. Everyone is dying to know what happens after they die. We know! In fact, we can describe heaven for people – down to the pavement.

Has anyone ever said to you, “Wow, you know what my future state is going to be after I die? In that case, what must I do to be saved? I’m coming to your church!”

It makes them wonder about the gospel when they see you acting in a loving way toward your boss at work, who just trampled all over you. The fact that you still care what kind of job you perform without appreciation . . .

What gets their attention is the fact that you care about someone in the classroom sitting next to you that you really do not know and most people do not really care about.

The old axiom is true – people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.

This is the reason the mark of the disciple is, “They will know you are My disciples by your ‘agape’ – love.” (John 13:35)

Paul seems to anticipate people perhaps searching for another loophole – “Okay, so what if we don’t try to be eloquent. In fact, what if we don’t say anything at all! Let’s just say we act with great faith in the power of God and great things happen.”

Paul adds, in verse 2,

[Imagine] If I have . . . all faith, so as to remove mountains . . . I am nothing.

The third point Paul is making is, without love, a reputation of faith becomes a farce.

Paul is suggesting that all faith is not as important as some love.

Notice that Paul does not say, “Without love, my acts of faith become nothing.”

He says, “Without love, *I* am nothing!”

This is the way to be a nothing: demonstrate all the gifts without demonstrating any grace.

Divine mathematics adds this up and says, “That equals nothing.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’ll back up my loveless heart with acts of love – that’ll be worth something! Just watch!”

Oh no – Paul addresses this next. Notice I Corinthians 13:3a.

And if I give my possessions to feed the poor...

“Listen, Paul, I don’t love people, but I’ll feed them. Look at my checkbook – look at all the charitable contributions. God is surely impressed with what I give away.”

Paul uses language in this verse that is very descriptive. The verb “ψωμιζω” means to literally feed by placing morsels of food into the mouth.^{vi}

This is someone who is literally ladling out the soup, one spoonful at a time, until all the food is gone and all the money is gone to buy more food.

Paul says, “It’s worthless to God.”

This is true because God is not impressed with what you do as much as He is with who you are. We focus on the works of our hands; He focuses on the condition of our heart.

To give without love profits you nothing.

The truth is that without love, there are a myriad of motives. You give:

- to make your conscience quiet;
- to put the unpleasant need out of sight;
- to look like you care;
- because of a sense of obligation;
- because you really do not want it anyway;
- to look like others around you that gain respect and attention by giving.

The rabbis of Paul’s day were teaching that the people never needed to give away more than 20%. Paul is upping the ante – in fact, he is talking about unheard of generosity.^{vii}

However, even if you gave everything you owned away, yet did not love the people you gave it away to, or love God who created mankind, your giving is worthless to your own account.

This is divine mathematics, $7 - 1 = 0!$

We have looked at six elements that all add up to zero without love. Paul is covering all the possibilities of life without love. He has addressed:

- what we say and how well we can say it;
- what we believe and how well we know it;
- what we give and how much we give it.

Paul now moves to the ultimate demonstration – surely this would get the attention and approval of God.

Look at I Corinthians 13:3b,

. . . and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

When Paul says, “If I surrender my body to be burned,” it is possible that he is referring to the ancient custom of branding slaves. Perhaps Paul is referring to someone going into slavery so that

someone else can be freed – allowing their body to have burned into it some brand.

I personally believe, given the ascending significance of sacrifice in this paragraph, that Paul is thinking of someone dying a martyr’s death.

Christians were not yet being burned at the stake, as they will one day, but criminals and enemies of Rome were. However, Paul is a Roman citizen and one of the guaranteed rights of Roman citizenship is that they could not be executed by being burned alive. No matter how criminal or vile, a Roman citizen could not be executed by burning.^{viii}

Paul says, “What if I was willing to lay aside my rights as a Roman citizen and die this horrific death? Even that would be nothing, without ‘agape’.”

In other words, Paul’s point is: without love, giving the ultimate gift gains nothing.

Conclusion

Seven characteristics minus love equals nothing.

$$7 - 1 = 0!$$

How do we avoid becoming the sum of these divine mathematics?

1. Whatever we say, ask, “Does it sound loving?”
2. Whatever we do, ask, “Is it done with love?”
3. Whatever we think, ask, “Is it balanced with love?”
4. Whenever we respond, ask, “Is it covered in love?”
5. Whenever we serve, ask, “Is it motivated by love?”
6. Whatever we give, ask, “Is it generated by love?”

You might say, “Stop! Slow down!”

I listed these quickly and briefly on purpose. You do not need to try to remember these six points.

It is whatever you are doing plus love that matters. It is whatever you are saying plus love that makes a difference. Whatever you are doing or saying or giving or serving or sacrificing – without love it is nothing.

Author and speaker Jerry Bridges gave a vivid illustration of this divine mathematics. He said,

Write down, either in your imagination or on a sheet of paper, a row of zeros. Then another line, then another . . . and keep going until you fill up the page on both sides. What do they add up to? Exactly nothing. But go back to

the beginning of your list and simply add some positive number – a 2 or a 5. Immediately all those zeros have value. That is the way with your gifts and faith and zeal and talents. They are zeros. But put love in front of them and they will have eternal value.^{ix}

Everything without love is always worth nothing.

Everything with love is always worth something – always.

These are convicting words. Do not forget, Paul is writing these words to a church; to a people who really want life to matter.

Well, Paul, how can I tell if what I say and what I do and how I serve and what I give has love added to it?

I can almost hear Paul saying, “I’m glad you asked – that is next.”

In our next session, Paul will answer this by saying, “Let me show what true love really looks like. I want to show how life acts with love added to everything.”

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ⁱ Alexander Strauch, Leading With Love (Lewis & Roth, 2006), p. 11.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, 1 Corinthians (Moody Press, 1984), p. 331.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy L. Laurin, First Corinthians: Where Life Matures (Kregel, 1987), p. 228.

^{iv} John MacArthur, Daily Devotional: Drawing Near (Crossway, 1993), Aug. 5th.

^v Robert G. Gromacki, Called to be Saints: 1 Corinthians (Baker, 1977), p. 160.

^{vi} R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of 1 & 2 Corinthians (Augsburg, 1937), p. 551.

^{vii} MacArthur, 1 Corinthians, p. 335.

^{viii} Lenski, p. 552.

^{ix} Strauch, p. 15.