

1 Corinthians 13:1–3

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

The Place of Chapter 13

Chapter 13 stands between chapter 12, where the members of the body are distinguished and their gifts set before us, and chapter 14, where the function of those gifts is regulated. It is like precious oil placed between the two — that lubrication which allows the members to function together with one another. Without it, the members work in friction and collision rather than in harmony.

It is also true, as observed in chapter 12, that gifts always have others in view — they are given to profit others, never for self. Love is the proper motive and animating spirit for the use of gifts. More than that, the more excellent way of verse 31 is not simply about how gifts should be exercised — it is about the

reflection of God's own nature in the individual Christian as he lives his life in every respect. Because God is love, that nature should shine in each of His children. Chapter 13 sets before us not a definition of love, but its characteristics. And from the first verse onward, the right way to read it is with the Lord Jesus Christ before the mind — for He alone fully displayed God's nature as love when He came into the world, and went to the cross for us.

Tongues — Sounding Brass and a Tinkling Cymbal

The apostle begins with tongues — deliberately, because it is what he is going to address more fully in chapter 14, and what had been most visibly misused at Corinth. *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels* — the highest possible degree of this gift — if love is absent, the result is sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Both of those are noise: one is perhaps pleasant in sound, the other merely a clang. But in either case, there is no intelligence in it, nothing of divine character, nothing that conveys life. A tongue of men is a living sound; these things are lifeless sounds, whatever their outward quality might be.

The tongues of men at Pentecost were exactly that — actual human languages. The men gathered at Jerusalem said: *We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God*. That was the reversal of Babel, where God divided the human race by language so that men could not understand one another. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down to send out a message in all those languages — the gospel, the good news of God's love in sending His Son, the message of salvation by faith in His name. That message is capable of being expressed in all the languages of men.

There is always an attempt by some to suggest that the miracle of tongues was in the ears of the hearers rather than in the mouths of the speakers — so that the speaker could be uttering something unintelligible while the Spirit rendered it intelligible to each hearer. But that is backwards. The evidence of Scripture is

continuous and consistent: tongues are languages — actual human languages that men speak. The interpreter interprets an actual language, not ecstatic utterance that has no content. You cannot render something without content intelligible, because there is no intelligence in it to be rendered intelligible. The name given in verse 1 is *tongues of men* — and the kind of thing spoken of has substance, meaning, and the capacity for interpretation in the full sense.

Prophecy, Knowledge, and Faith Without Love

Verse 2 moves through three things in ascending scale: prophecy together with the understanding of all mysteries and all knowledge, and then all faith so as to remove mountains. These are not four separate things but three — prophecy with its associated knowledge of mysteries, then knowledge as a gift, then faith. And all three, in the highest possible degree, are nothing without love.

It is instructive that the word *gift* before *prophecy* is not in the original text. That matters, because Balaam had prophecy — and Saul had prophecy — without having the gift of prophecy in the sense of a permanent endowment. Balaam was directly under the control of God and could not say what God did not allow. Yet he knew where he was headed, and would have liked to die the death of the righteous. These things can be had by persons who are not of God, which gives all the more force to the apostle's point: whatever the degree of gift, love is the surpassing thing.

A striking illustration from the Old Testament: Ahithophel the Gilonite was Absalom's counsellor. Everything he said in those days was, as the Scripture puts it, as if a man had enquired of God — perfect counsel, right on the mark. He had, in a figure, all knowledge. Yet he ended in a fate not unlike that of Judas Iscariot, because he followed Absalom instead of David. He had no love for David. The man who defeated him was Hushai the Archite — and the one distinguishing feature of Hushai given in Scripture is that he was David's friend. His love for

David is what the record notes. Knowledge without love was overcome by friendship that had love.

The Six Things That Fall Short

Across verses 1 through 3 there are six things set out — tongues, prophecy with understanding of mysteries, knowledge, faith, the disposal of all one's goods, and giving the body to be burned. Six is a number that in Scripture falls short of the perfect seven. All six of these things, in whatever degree they may be held or displayed, fall short without love.

The two things in verse 3 are of a different character from the three in verse 2. Bestowing all one's goods to feed the poor is an outward appearance of grace — apparent generosity. Giving the body to be burned has the look of extreme devotedness and martyrdom. But there is martyrdom of the right kind and there is fanatical zeal. Stephen is the great proto-martyr for the Christian — there was no spirit other than the Spirit of Christ in him. He gave his testimony to the truth of Christ in the glory, and they took his body. He did not present himself to be stoned. A fanatical zeal that offers itself to be burned for a cause may demonstrate sincerity about that cause, but it is not of the same character as Stephen's martyrdom — and without love, it profits nothing.

I Am Nothing — Words of Regret, Not Humility

There is a meaningful gradation across the three closing phrases: verse 1 ends *I am become* as sounding brass; verse 2 ends *I am nothing*; and verse 3 ends *it profiteth me nothing*. Each is slightly different.

When the apostle Paul says elsewhere that he is nothing, it is the expression of deepest humility — the self emptied so that Christ might be everything. But here in verse 2, the words *I am nothing* are not that. The whole thrust of the verse is a

striving to be something: I have prophecy and should be highly thought of; I have all knowledge and should be greatly esteemed; I have all faith and should be reckoned as remarkable. Without love — I am nothing. Those are not words of humble satisfaction that self has been set aside; they are words of regret, because self was the underlying motive all along, self was striving to gain something, and self ends up with nothing. The thing striven for was never obtained.

Verse 3 follows naturally: if I give all my goods, and give my body to be burned, and have not love — it profiteth me nothing. Because love was absent, self was the real object. And self gets nothing out of it. This stands in great contrast to vast philanthropic systems in which men dispose of goods while hoping to see their name on a brass plaque — the praise of men coming back in return for what went out. That is not divine love. The Lord Jesus came down from heaven knowing in advance that all the world would give Him in return was the cross.

Love Seeks the Good of Its Object

Before entering the list of love's characteristics in verses 4 through 7, one general observation gives a key to everything: love always seeks the good of its object. That single principle distinguishes love from all the things set out in verses 1 through 3 — all of which, without love, have self in view. None of those things essentially seeks the good of another. One may have all knowledge and sit and gloat over it. Knowledge puffs up, as this letter has already said. But love is constituted differently — it is always oriented outward, toward the one loved.

And love is not a zero-sum quantity. If one person has much love, that does not mean less is available for another. Knowledge is the same: one person's gain in knowledge does not diminish what is available to others. But love, like faith toward God, draws from a limitless source — because its source is God Himself, who is love, and in whom there is no limit. The prayer of Ephesians 3 sets this out: *that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and*

grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. There is no limit to that.

The I occurs repeatedly across the first three verses — I speak, I have, I give, I am. Then, when the characteristics of love are brought before us from verse 4, the personal pronoun vanishes entirely. Love has no I at the centre of it. That alone speaks volumes.

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