

Nothing Without Love

Spring Bible Conference 2011

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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Well, good evening. I am thrilled to see you hear tonight and thrilled to be here.

I was surprised and pleased when pastor Robbins invited me to come on the weekend of your 25th anniversary as a Church and it is a thrill to be here. It is great to drive through the mountains from Asheville, beautiful time of year to be in South Carolina and a joy to spend these days with you thinking about what we have just been singing about, the love of God as he desires to display it through our lives.

It is always a joy to be in a church pastored by somebody that you admire. I want to tell you a little secret about preachers, though. Sometimes people have the impression that they preach or speak on the things that they are particularly good at. It is actually the opposite of that. You usually speak on things that you are not very good at, but that you know that you need to learn about more about from the Scriptures so that God can do a work of grace in your life. And so usually a preacher is not so much speaking about something he has expertise at, but speaking as a fellow struggler. And the really good preachers don't back away from what the Bible actually says even in the areas of life where they are struggling.

Which is all a long way of saying I am speaking to you about the love of God. But I am not a particularly good lover. It is actually my need for more of the love of God in my life that drives me, again, to look with you at 1 Corinthians 13. And also a sense that if there is anything any congregation needs at any point in its history, it is more of the love of God, more of the love of Christ flowing into your life and through your life and out into the lives of others so that they, too, may know the Savior.

And so it seemed to me as I thought about what might be appropriate on the weekend of the 25th anniversary, it is never wrong to preach to the congregation about God's love.

I say that this is not a particular area of expertise for me. I tried to say the same thing a week ago and got into trouble for doing it. I was speaking on the occasion of baccalaureate at Wheaton College and as I was speaking to the graduating seniors and their families and our faculty and the whole campus community and I was drawing some lessons from the life of Solomon who particularly later in his life turned away in many

ways from his love the Lord and I pointed out one of the problems that Solomon got into. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines and they were... this was part of what turned his heart away from the Lord.

I made the observation that it is hard enough for me to love one woman let alone a thousand women, which I meant as a way of saying I am not a very good lover, but my wife took it the other way as if she were hard to love.

I said I think most husbands understood what I was trying to say, but really, there is nothing I need more in my life than more of the love of Jesus.

Are you able to say that tonight for yourself, too? And as we anticipate spending time in God's Word tonight and, again, tomorrow morning and evening, if there is one I need it is more of the love of Jesus, more of his love, in my case, for my wife, the one that God has called me to love until death, more of his love for my children and for the rest of my extended family, more of his love for the Church including all of the people in the Church that it is hard for me to love.

I am sure this is a very lovable congregation, more lovable than most, but don't you find from time to time that there are few people it is a little bit harder to love than others. I need more of his love for my colleagues at work, more of his love for my neighbors, particularly those who still need to hear the gospel, more of his love. All of the lost and lonely people who are close to the heart of God even when they are far from my thoughts.

Everywhere I go in every relationship I have in life I need more of the love of Jesus and maybe most of all in my relationship with God himself, the lover of my soul.

What about you? Are you loving the way that Jesus loves? Or do you need more of his love in your life, more love for God, more love for other people?

One woman who expressed her own need for more love was the hymn writer Elizabeth Payson Prentiss. Elizabeth Prentiss had prolonged and painful earthly sufferings. She struggled her entire life with insomnia. She was afflicted with very severe headaches. Probably they would have been diagnosed as migraines. I don't know. But this condition left her often exhausted. She endured the pain of loss, losing two children in very short succession. And afterwards, her already frail health was nearly destroyed and in deep distress of her soul she cried out—these are her exact words, “Our home is broken up, our lives wrecked, our hopes shattered, our dreams dissolved. I don't think I can stand living another moment.”

And yet during those dark and desperate days when her pain and loss led her to think that she could not live even one more day, Elizabeth Prentiss never lost her hope in the love of God. And, in fact, it was during those very days that she began writing a hymn asking Jesus for more of his love in her life, “More love to Thee, oh Christ,” she prayed, “More love to thee. This all my prayer shall be, more love oh Christ, to thee.”

As the hymn goes on she speaks very frankly about earthly sorrows and asks the Lord to let even those troubles teach her to love even more.

Let sorrow do its work,
Send grief and pain.
Sweet are thy messengers,
Sweet, their refrain.
Then they can sing with me
More love, oh Christ, to thee.
More love to thee,
More love to thee.

Elizabeth Prentiss found even when she despaired of life itself, that there was a love that was better than life. Here is what she later wrote.

“To love Christ more is the deepest need and constant cry of my soul. Out in the woods and on my bed when I am happy and busy and said and idle, this whisper keeps going up for more love, more love, more love.”

Well, as I say, one of the best places in the Bible to look for more of God’s love is 1 Corinthians 13. You may know it is one of the most famous passage in the Bible. I invite you to turn there in the church Bible or whatever Bible you have with you. It is on page 1021 in the church Bible and let’s have this passage read for us and let’s pay careful attention. This is the Word of God.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging 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, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in

part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.¹

Now this is a very well known passage, probably because it is read so frequently at weddings. People often call it the love chapter of the Bible. That is very appropriate. The word “love” appears here more than a dozen times. It is probably the Bible’s most complete portrait of love.

My father, who is an English scholar, would call this an encomium which is a fancy English professor’s way of referring to a formal or high flown expression of praise. That is what this is. It is a praise of love. It is, if you will, a love song for love.

If you were to break down the passage into its parts, I think you would find in the first three verses, Paul establishing the necessity of love. Then in verses four through eight sketching the character of love and then in the last verses, eight through 13, celebrating the permanence of love as the greatest of all the gifts of God.

Now this passage is, I think most people would say, at least people in the Church or even outside the Church, it is read so frequently at Church weddings, most people would think of this as a passage that they understand to some degree. But really it is a passage, I think, not nearly as well understood as it ought to be. For one thing, people usually take it out of context. Sometimes they do, at least, pick up the last phrase of chapter 12 where Paul says, “I show you a more excellent way.”² And that is a good place to begin, because chapter 13, I think, is that more excellent way that the apostle had in mind. But there is a wider context here that is often missed.

One way to make sure that we don’t miss everything that God has for us in 1 Corinthians 13, is to remember who the Corinthians were and what God said to them in this letter.

If there was one thing that that church needed, it was more of the love of Jesus. It was a church sharply divided over theology and practice, over social class, over spiritual gifts. There were some people there that said they followed Paul. Others followed Peter or Apollos.

“My apostle is better than your apostle.” That was the attitude.

Then there were those—and this is, I suppose, the ultimate form of spiritual one ups man ship who said, “Well, as for me, I follow Christ.”

There were similar conflicts about ministry, various Corinthians claiming that their gifts were the be all and end all of Christianity.

“My ministry is more important than your ministry.”

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

² 1 Corinthians 12:31.

This was the issue in chapter 12 where the apostle reminded them that although the Church is made up of many parts, we all belong to one body. And so when Paul wrote in chapter 13 about love, he is not trying to give people something nice to read at weddings. The love he is talking about here isn't a romantic love, particularly. It is not a love of desire. It is a love... it is a selfless love of brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so rather than preparing people for marriage, Paul is trying desperately to show a church of self centered Christians that there is a better way to live.

This chapter is, I suppose, not primarily for lovers, but for all the loveless people in the Church who tend to think that their way of talking about God or worshipping God or serving God or giving to God is better than everyone else's.

Here is another mistake that many people make. We tend to read 1 Corinthians 13 as kind of an encouraging, feel good Bible passage with a lot of happy thoughts about love. Personally, I find the passage almost terrifying, because it sets a standard for love that I know I could never meet. None of us lives with this kind of love.

I think there is a very easy way to prove it. Maybe this is something that you have done before, but I find it helpful. Just start reading at verse four and put your own name into the passage every time you see the word love and then see how it sounds.

“Philip suffers long and is kind. Carl does not envy. Rachel does not parade herself. She is not puffed up.”

You just go right through the list. Plug your own name in all of the places where love shows up and very quickly you become uncomfortable because you know you are not patient, you are irritable. There are times when you do seek you own interest. And very quickly you discover that you are not all that loving at all.

And, of course, the problem is that love ought to be the distinguishing characteristic of our Christianity.

“Love is the virtue,” said Jonathan Edwards, “that is more insisted on than any other virtue in the New Testament. And Paul is certainly insisting on it here, particularly in these opening verses he makes a logical argument proving the necessity of love. Love is so essential and this is really the main point of what I want to say tonight, so essential that we are nothing without it. We are nothing without love.

Now I mentioned earlier that this passage, if you wanted to analyze its literary form, would be called an encomium. It is spoken in praise of love.

In ancient literature an encomium usually began with a comparison in which the author takes what he wants to praise and then compares it to something else. And the point is to show how beautiful or marvelous or essential, or whatever it is that he wants to say about the thing that he wants to praise.

And that is very nearly what the apostle Paul does here. He takes love and he gives us a series of conditional comparisons to show how necessary love is. Each comparison has something to do with spiritual gifts or accomplishments, things that talented and virtuous Christians either have or do.

And the point of this style of argument is to show that love is superior to all of those other gifts. Paul starts with speaking in tongues, a gift that some Corinthians had and other Corinthians didn't. But even if they did have that gift, they were nothing without love.

And so Paul says, "If I speak in these tongues, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal."

To speak in tongues is to communicate spiritual truth through a miraculous gift of utterance. To speak in the tongues of angels, well that must be an even greater gift. It is to speak the very language of heaven. And Paul doesn't want to minimize that celestial gift of eloquence, but he does want to say that even that kind of gift is nothing without love.

Some scholars believe that when Paul spoke here about a noisy gong, he was referring to hollow bronze jars that were used as resonating chambers in ancient theaters. This was the Greco Roman system for the amplification of sound.

The point then would be that without love, our words only produce an empty sound coming out of a hollow, lifeless vessel.

Others have thought that perhaps Paul was referring to the kind of gongs that were used to worship pagan deities, including some of the gods and goddesses that were worshipped in Corinth. And if that is the case, then he is saying that without love we are merely pagans.

I have to say that when I see these references to sounding brass or sounding gongs, as it is translated in some other versions, it always reminds me of the gong show from the early 1970s. Some of you will remember that. This was, I suppose, the forerunner to some of the singing contests that are on television these days. But a contestant would get up to sing and then if the judges didn't particularly like the song they would get up and they would bang on the gong and that would be the end of the performance. It was all over.

And gongs are like that. They can make a lot of noise, but they don't make very much music. Cymbals do make music when used the right way, but if somebody keeps banging on a cymbal, the noise can be deafening.

And no matter how gifted we are, this is what we become if we do not use our gifts in a loving way. No matter how gifted we are, no one can hear the gospel from the life of a loveless Christian. They just hear bong, bong, clang, clash, clash.

Recently I heard Josh Moody who preaches at the college church in Wheaton speaking on this passage. Here is how he brought the metaphor up to date.

“If I network for the gospel, but have not love, I am only a noisy blog or a meaningless tweet.”

The point is no matter how you make the comparison, we are nothing without love.

Verse two Paul starts listing other gifts. A number of them happen to be gifts that he had discussed back in chapter 12. He mentions prophecy.

If I have this gift of prophecy the gift to foretell the future, perhaps, or supernatural insight to interpret what is happening in the world and in the Church from God’s point of view. Paul mentions here the gift of understanding all mysteries, of having all knowledge.

And notice that word “all” which is repeated. It is very emphatic. Here is somebody that has all knowledge, someone who has a comprehensive grasp of the mysteries of God and of the universe.

I think of, as an example from Scripture, the prophet Daniel and his ability to penetrate even the darkest mysteries, things that King Nebuchadnezzar could never understand and yet Daniel as a prophet was able to reveal them. Paul speaks here of knowledge, the spiritual knowledge of biblical truth, something the human mind can only comprehend by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Some of the Corinthians had these kinds of gifts. I dare say you have some of these same gifts in your own congregation, gifts of knowledge and of understanding. Presbyterian churches tend to be pretty strong in that area.

But the point here is that even if you have those gifts, they are nothing without love.

A man may have insight. A woman may comprehend the deep mysteries of God. Whatever prophetic and intellectual gifts a person has, they are nothing without love. And so Paul says, “Even if I have these gifts, but have not love, I am nothing.”

Or consider the gift of absolute faith. Paul speaks about that here in verse two.

“If I have all faith...” the kind of faith that could remove mountains, even that faith without love is nothing.

Paul is not referring here to saving faith, that faith by which every believer first trusts in Christ for salvation, but about the extraordinary gift that some believers have in extraordinary measure to trust God for what seems to be impossible, especially in the work of his church and in the growth of his kingdom.

I would be every surprised if in the testimonies that were given last night about 25 years in the life of this congregation, if there weren't some examples of that kind of faith, people believing that God could do something that they couldn't yet see and yet they had the gift of faith to see it and to trust it and believe in what God can do.

One scholar takes what the apostle here calls all faith and describes it as an especially robust, infectious, bold, trustful faith that performs a special task within a community faced with seemingly unconquerable problems.

What a gift it is, too, when a congregation has members with that kind of faith. It has... that kind of faith has the power to move mountains. That is what Jesus said to his apostles and that is what Paul alludes to here. By the grace of God faith is able to accomplish the impossible.

But even such faith is nothing without love. You can see the way the apostle is building up his argument. He is bringing some of the strongest gifts, some of the things that are most valuable in the Christian life and he is saying, "Even beyond that, by way of comparison, love is more essential than these things."

In verse three Paul moves from the gifts we have to the good works we perform. His argument really is building to a climax.

If I give away all I have, if "I bestow all my goods to the poor, if I give my body to be burned, but have not love it profits me nothing."³

Here are two very exceptional examples. Not many people sell all their earthly possessions and give 100 percent of the proceeds to the poor. I would be surprised, in fact, if there was someone in this congregation who had done that, although possibly someone has. Occasionally Christians do. Not many people suffer martyrdom, which is the other exceptional example he gives here, a killing act of self sacrifice. I mean these are two of the greatest things anyone could ever do for Christ. Surely somebody that did those things would deserve some sort of reward and yet even the greatest good works can be done without love. They can be done to feed spiritual pride or to get something from God.

Yet not even the terrible pains of a flaming martyrdom are enough. Unless we are motivated by true love for God, it all counts for nothing. We gain nothing. We profit nothing. His love is the only thing that matters.

Now understand. When Paul gives us this list it is intended to say, really, that no matter what you would put on this list, love is essential. He is really including all of our spiritual gifts, all of our so-called accomplishments. No matter what God has given us, no matter what we have done for God, it means nothing without love.

³ 1 Corinthians 13:3.

God may grant us a gift of helping or hospitality, of teaching or administration. It may be our privilege to serve in some position of leadership. God may allow us to serve as a missionary or an evangelist or to serve the poor. And yet, shockingly, it is possible to use our gifts in ministry without having love in our hearts for anyone except ourselves.

It is even possible for us to do something that looks like it is for someone else when it is really for us to enhance our own reputation, to feed our satisfaction with ourselves.

Paul is not denying here the value of spiritual gifts. He is not minimizing the importance of ministry in the Church. Praise God for prophets and martyrs. But he is saying that every spiritual gift, whatever God has given to us, ought to be used in a loving way.

Jonathan Edwards said, “Whatever is done or suffered, yet if the heart is withheld from God there is nothing really given to him. What matters most is not how gifted we are, but how loving we are.”

And, understand, this message is for the Church. Paul is not talking here to unbelievers, primarily. He is talking to gifted Christians who are actively serving in ministry who are very involved in the life of the local church. I mean, they must be because this letter was read out loud to a congregation. He is speaking to people in the church.

And so rather than congratulating ourselves for what we have done for God or looking down on people who don't serve God the way that we do or thinking that we have it right and everyone else has it wrong, rather than any of those things, God is calling us to do everything that we do for love. Otherwise it is all for nothing.

Now as I read these opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13, I have to wonder what hope there is for me. I have not conversed with angels, as far as I know. I certainly have not moved any mountains or suffered unto death. I have done much less, very little actually in the grand scheme of things and even the things that I do were done with a lot less love than they should have been done. But I believe there is hope for me and hope for you and hope of anyone in the gospel.

And I want to illustrate the truths that we have been looking at here from the opening verses in 1 Corinthians 13 with a story from the gospels that I think really connects to the theme of this passage and will help us drive it home and apply it.

It is a story told in the gospel of Mark chapter 10. Let me encourage you to turn in your Bibles there to Mark chapter 10. It is a familiar story.

You know, we will never learn how to love by working it up from our own hearts, but only by having more of Jesus in our lives. And so if we really want to grow in our love then we need to have more of the love of Jesus as we meet him in the gospel.

Now Mark 10 tells a story of a man that Jesus met on the road to Jerusalem. People usually call this man the rich young man, the rich young ruler sometimes he is called. But I think we could also call him this, the man who thought he knew how to love.

Whatever we call him, this man was interested in eternal life. He assumed that there was something that he could do to get it and so he ran up to Jesus. He knelt before him and he asked this question.

Verse 17.

“Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”⁴

And so here the man is raising the most important of all spiritual issues, the question of eternal life. We are all destined to die and so if there is such a thing as eternal life, it is worth every effort, surely, to gain it.

The problem, though, is that this man is making a faulty assumption. He assumes that salvation comes by doing rather than believing and so he asks Jesus what he has to do to get eternal life.

I say it is a faulty assumption because none of us is good enough to be saved by the good things we do. We have all done too many of the wrong things and not enough of the right things and even the right things that we have done were done, at some level, in the wrong way or for the wrong reason. They were not perfectly pure.

And so Jesus said to the man, “No one is good, but One, that is, God.”⁵

Note, this is what Jesus says in verse 18.

No one is good, not the young man who is talking to Jesus, not you, not me, not anyone. Only God is perfectly good. And Jesus proves this, I think, by rehearsing the standard of God’s righteousness.

He said to the man, “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not bear false witness,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother.’”⁶

Familiar commandments that come from the 10 Commandments, those laws that God gave to Moses on the mountain.

But, you know, we can take these commandments, I think from a slightly different perspective. These are not just the laws of God. They are certainly not arbitrary rules.

⁴ Mark 10:17.

⁵ Mark 10:18.

⁶ Mark 10:19.

They are commandments that display the love that God demands. Each of these commandments requires us to love our neighbor.

When God tells us do not murder, he is telling us to love our neighbors by protecting their lives. He says, “Don’t commit adultery.” He is really telling us to love people by safeguarding their sexual purity and so on, preserving property, honoring somebody’s reputation, telling the truth. All of these are ways to show love.

We could really take all of the commandments that Jesus mentions and summarize them like this. “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

In fact, that is exactly the way Jesus did summarize them. You will remember in the gospel of Matthew he said that the first great commandment is to love God with all your heart. The second great commandment is to love your neighbor.

And so this is the answer that Jesus gives the rich young man when he asks what he has to do to inherit eternal life.

“I will tell you what you have to do,” Jesus said, “If you want to be saved by doing, all you have to do is love your neighbor. Just love your neighbor the way that the law of God tells you to love.”

Well, that is easy enough, the man thought to himself. I have never killed anyone. I have never slept with another man’s wife. I have never committed a felony.

What he said out loud was this.

“Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth.”⁷

And if all it takes to gain eternal life is just avoid breaking the big commandments, what could be easier? The young man thought that he had already done all of that.

And Jesus wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t know. He had learned all of this in sabbath school.

But understand what the man was really saying. If these laws show the love that God demands, then he was claiming that he knew how to love, that there was enough of the love of God in his life already. He was already there.

Well, is that what you would claim? Would you stand before God and say, “I have been loving people all my life. What a great lover I am”?

Well, we would never come right out and say it, not in so many words, but it is tempting at times to think that way. Most of us most of the time we tend to believe we do a pretty

⁷ Mark 10:20.

good job of loving other people. And I think you can tell that. Here are just a couple of tests.

How often do you repent for having a loveless heart for a lack of love? Is that a prominent item in the things that you go to the Lord for by way of repentance? Is learning to love like Jesus one of your highest priorities? So if somebody asked you, you know, “What are you really working on in your spiritual life right now?” One of the first things that you say is, “This is really my priority right now is to live with more of the love of Jesus.”

When was the last time you prayed in a specific and intentional way that the Holy Spirit would make you a better lover? When have you prayed specifically that God would give you love for a particular person?

These are some of the ways to test whether this is the priority for us that Jesus apparently thought it ought to be in the Christian life.

Well, this young man that Jesus was talking to was shown, I think, by what Jesus said to him, that he was not the lover that he thought he was. And Jesus went on to give him a very specific, straightforward test.

“You lack one thing,” Jesus says in verse 21. Here it is. It is just one thing that you lack.

“Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.”⁸

It is interesting that Jesus says to him, “One thing you lack...”

It must have been with a little bit of a smile. Surely Jesus isn't really conceding that the man has kept all of those commandments in all of their purity and perfection. But he goes on and he gives the man a test, what you might call the generosity test for love.

The man claims, notice what Jesus said to him in verse 19. He says, “Do not defraud anyone.” And the man claims that he has been doing that all of his life.

And so now Jesus wants to call his bluff. You have never defrauded anyone. You have never taken something away from somebody else that really they should have? Really? Is that true? Let's put that to the test? What about the poor?

Because as fellow human beings, as people made in the very image of God, they have a claim on your charity. Now, do you love them enough to give away what you have so that they can have what they need?

⁸ Mark 10:21.

Jesus was testing the man's love for his neighbor and, really, at the same time testing his love for God. Would he still claim the rights to be Lord of his own life and his own property, or would he relinquish all of his own resources and trust Jesus only?

Sadly, the man failed the test. Mark tells us that the man was sad at this word, verse 22. Some translations put it this way. The man was disheartened by the saying. He went away sorrowful because he had great possessions. I mean, the man was rich. He had a lot of things in his life, a lot of things that were keeping him away from Jesus.

I think disheartened is an interesting way to think about this sadness because really the man's heart was on display. He thought he knew how to love, but it turned out that he loved his money more than he loved Jesus and more than he loved other people.

Now my purpose in telling this story is partly to convince us that we do not love any more than this man did. In fact, if Jesus gave us this same demand to give everything we have to the poor, most of us would come up quite quickly with a long list of reasons why we shouldn't.

Well, not everyone is called to sell all their possessions, we would say. I mean, this man may have been told to get rid of everything he had, but that is his calling. It is not my calling. I mean, surely I have to provide for my family. I need to take care of my own basic needs. I need to have money to give away for kingdom work, not... there are other kinds of kingdom work that need support, not just feeding the poor.

I mean, all of those objections and ways of thinking about this passage are reasonable enough. But the real issue for most of us is the same issue that was the issue for this man and that is that we want to place limits on our love. We are ready to give, but only if we will still have something left over. We are willing to care as long as it isn't too inconvenient. We are able to love the people love us back.

Really we ought to admit that we do not love the way that Jesus loves. It may be true that we are nothing without love, but, unfortunately, we are nothing like the lovers that God wants us to be.

I think the apostle Paul was willing to admit this.

If you turn back to 1 Corinthians 13, which is our main focus, I think it is striking that he uses the first person singular. Notice the way he begins. He doesn't say to the Corinthians, "Look, if you speak in tongues and if you have prophetic powers and so forth," no. He says, "If I do these things without love, I am nothing."

He is not putting something over onto us that he is not willing to wrestle with in his own life. He is not just scolding us here. He is including himself. He is bearing witness to what he learned about his own sinful heart.

And, frankly, Paul himself had all of these spiritual gifts: tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith. He had already given away his possessions. He had offered his body unto death and yet he knew all of that was nothing and that he himself was nothing without love.

Unfortunately, unlike Paul, the rich young man in the gospel of Mark was not ready to confess the lovelessness of his sinful heart. And that may... that brings us to what may be the most remarkable detail in this passage.

Let me... I need to ask you to turn back to Mark. There is one more thing that I want you to see. I should have told you to put a finger there, Mark chapter 10. It is page 893 in the church Bible.

Verse 20.

You will remember the rich young man is boasting that he had kept all of God's laws for loving his neighbor. And notice what the Scripture says that when the man said this:

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”⁹

The gospels are full of Jesus seeing things, looking at things, noticing things. Many of the significant miracle accounts begin with Jesus looking at someone, seeing their situation.

Now in this case he looks at this man with his boast that he is the man who knows how to love and I say this is a remarkable detail that Jesus not only looked at this man, but loved him, because, frankly, one of the hardest people in the world to love is a self righteous sinner who thinks that he has spiritual act together.

Here is a spiritual know it all. He has such a high opinion of himself, that he refuses to confess his sin. You challenge him in a spiritual area where people need to grow and he says, “I have been doing that all my life. I mean, don't come to me with that stuff. I already know all of that.”

Most of us would not have liked this man at all. But the Scripture says that Jesus loved him.

And I believe it was just because Jesus loved him that he gave the man this generosity test for love. He wanted the man to see that he was not the lover that he thought he was, that he needed more of the love of Jesus in his life.

I love this little detail from the gospel of Mark that Jesus loved him, because I think it gives a glimpse of the love that Jesus has for me, the love that Jesus has for you. Really, we are not any more lovable than this rich young man in the gospels, but Jesus looks at us with his same heart of love. He helps us see that we are not the lovers that we like to think we are. He has been helping us see that tonight as his Spirit proclaims his Word to us.

⁹ Mark 10:20.

But he doesn't just stop there. He doesn't just say, "Look, you are not the kind of lover that you want to be." By his death on the cross he offers forgiveness for all of his lovelessness, for all of our lovelessness and then he pours out his Spirit and puts his love into our lives so that we can begin, at least to love the way that he loves.

We are nothing without love. That is the message of 1 Corinthians 13 and its opening verses. We are nothing without love, but Jesus does nothing without love. That is the message of Mark 10 and, indeed, of everything else in the whole Bible. It was not just love that enabled Jesus to look at this particular man and turn his heart toward him. He was love that brought Jesus down from heaven in the first place, entering into our human situation so that he could live among us and show us his love. It was love that caused him to perform miracles, love that led him to preach the gospel and not get distracted from preaching the gospel by all of the miracles he had the power to perform. It was love that led him to Calvary and the sufferings there, love that enabled him to endure to the very end of the cross. It was love that exalted Jesus to glory. He is the eternal incarnation of the love of God and therefore it is with love that Jesus looks at us now.

It could be said of us what is said in Mark 10:21. Jesus looking at you, loves you.

Earlier I mentioned how ridiculous, frankly, this chapter sounds if you put your own name in all of the places where it says love. You know, it reads pretty well if you put Jesus in there. It reads quite differently in 1 Corinthians 13 is a portrait of love, if it is a sketch of the character of love. It is really a sketch of the Savior that we meet in the gospels.

In fact, if you are able to come tomorrow we will look at a few very specific things that are said about love in 1 Corinthians 13 and we will go, again, to the gospels and we will look at the way that this aspect of love and that aspect of love is demonstrated, it is lived out in the life of Jesus. Jesus is patient and kind. He does not envy or boast. He is not arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way. He is not irritable or resentful. He does not rejoice at evil. He rejoices with the truth. He bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

And you get to the beginning of 1 Corinthians 13. Verse eight it says, "Love never fails."

Well, we could say it this way. Jesus never fails.

I think in a way Paul almost encourages us to read the love chapter in this Christ centered way by the dramatic shift he makes between verses one to three where he speaks in the first person and then verses four to eight where love is personified. I mean, he can't speak in the first person then. He needs to distance it a little bit. He personifies love.

But if you want to know who is the person behind then personification of love, it is Jesus. First Paul tells us all the things that he can't do without love. Then he tells us what only love can do.

And the reason love can do all of these things is because it has become incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Are you able to say Jesus is everything that I am not? And are you, then, able not to be crushed by that reality, but liberated by it because the love of Jesus is so big, it is so expansive that there is even room in the love of Jesus for me? And because he loves me, he has promised to save me, to forgive me, to change me?

We are nothing without love, but when we know Jesus who does nothing without love, he will help us love the way that he loves.

The next time Paul wrote to the Corinthians he testified to the life transforming love of Jesus which turns our affections inside out. It compels us to stop loving ourselves and to start loving others.

Here is what Paul said.

“The love of God controls us or constrains us, because we have concluded this, that one has died for all and that therefore all have died and he died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”

Are you able to give that kind of testimony tonight that it is the love of Christ that is constraining and controlling your life, that you are not living for yourself, but living for others for Jesus' sake?

I invite you, as I encourage myself, to welcome more of the love of Jesus into your life. Confess that you are not the lover you ought to be. Ask Jesus to forgive you for that lovelessness and also to send you the gift of his Holy Spirit to fill your life with his love

Say to the Lord, “You are pure love, Jesus. Give me that love in my life for your sake so that I can touch the lives of others with your love.”

Father, we do make this our prayer tonight. Lord, help us to see in a clearer way than ever before the limits of our own love. Lord, even in coming days we would ask that as we catch ourselves being impatient and irritable and envious that we would recognize that the real problem with us is a lack of love. And then, Lord, not simply to confess that lovelessness, but to ask for more of your love to be poured out into our lives by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We have enough faith, Lord, to believe that you can give us more of your love. We pray for it in Jesus' name. Amen.