

“Sine Qua Non”

1 Corinthians 13:1-3; 1 John 4:7-12 ¹

We don't have to read more than a couple of paragraphs in 1 Corinthians before it becomes obvious that this was a congregation that was in a mess. While Paul was writing partly to answer questions the Corinthians have posed to him, he spends the first half of the letter addressing and correcting issues about which the Corinthians have apparently not asked, but that were far more spiritually important than the things about which they did ask.

Although the church in Corinth was well-supplied with spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 1:7), they were dangerously empty when it came to love. The members were arrogant, they were self-serving, they were disorderly, and their gatherings were characterized by conflict, while all along they boasted about their spiritual maturity and their spiritual power.² Corinth was really a zoo!

It appears that the great variety of blessings enjoyed by the Corinthian church had become the cause of their pride. These folks had developed an inflated opinion of themselves, not unlike some prominent personalities much in the news of late. They had taken their eyes off of their Lord and focused their gaze on themselves, so they were now quite puffed up. It has always been true that when pride gets a grip on the human heart, it is not content merely to nurse its own inflated sense of greatness, but it insists that others recognize its claims as well—hence the factionalism that was developing in the congregation.³

We got a short overview of the letter as a whole last week, and this week we begin our study of chapter 13, which is commonly known as “The Love Chapter.” It has been often noted that in this chapter, Paul wrote about love that in a way that still guides our understanding today, and the truth of the matter is that you and I don't study this chapter so much as this chapter “studies us.”⁴

First Corinthians 13 is not a digression from Paul's larger argument, a charming, poetic excursus that gives ministers something to read at weddings. This chapter is an integral part of Paul's larger argument.⁵ As he criticizes the Corinthians' use of their spiritual gifts, Paul emphasizes the crucial truth that love gives life to all the gifts and long outlives them.⁶

The chapter falls nicely into three sections: verses 1-3 make the point that without love, spiritual gifts are of no value whatever; verses 4-7 describe the nature of love, contrasting the Corinthians' behavior with what love really looks like; and verses 8-13 highlight the temporary nature of spiritual gifts in comparison with love's permanence.⁷ And it's important to point out as we begin that **love is not a “spiritual gift.”** Love is not one of a variety of empowerments that the Spirit grants as He wills. **Love is one of the “Fruit of the Spirit,”** those eternal character qualities that God intends to develop in the lives of each and every follower of Jesus.⁸

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 20, 2015.

² Evan May, *Love Gives Life: A Study of 1 Corinthians 13* (Lexington, KY: Golden Mouth Press, 2012), p. 9.

³ James Renihan, *True Love: 1 Corinthians 13 - Understanding the Real Meaning of Christian Love* (Carlisle, PA: EP Books, 2010), p. 31.

⁴ May, p. 1.

⁵ David E. Garland, “1 Corinthians,” *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), p. 605.

⁶ May, p. 10.

⁷ Craig Blomberg, “1 Corinthians,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 258.

⁸ Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

This morning, we're just looking at the first section of the chapter, verses 1-3: *If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

Although Paul's real point is to criticize the *Corinthians'* behavior, he makes a strategic shift as he begins chapter 13, and begins to write in first-person singular. Paul describes these several failures as though he himself were making them, hoping that this indirect approach will allow the Corinthians to relax their defensiveness sufficiently to hear his point.⁹

Beginning now with verse 1, we don't know exactly what Paul meant by "tongues of angels." Some think that he's referring to the Corinthians' own estimation of the spiritual gift of glossolalia, or "speaking in tongues," which appears to have been their favorite. Together with some faith groups even today, the Corinthians apparently saw "speaking in tongues" as the supreme gift, and they prided themselves on their practice of it.¹⁰

Reading between the lines of Paul's comments throughout the letter, it sounds as though the Corinthians were trying to out-shout one another in worship as they displayed their facility with this gift, almost as if the various instruments of an orchestra loudly played different pieces of music at the same time: one plays Beethoven, another Mozart, another Shostakovich, and another Copeland. All of them are talented musicians, but as they battle one another, the beauty of the music is lost in the cacophony of sound.¹¹

After identifying the ability to "*speak in the tongues of men or of angels,*" Paul notes that even such splendid gifts, if they are exercised without being permeated with love, are no more than "*a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*" Once again, we're not sure just what Paul meant, but it's clear that he didn't mean the comparison to be a flattering one. Paul's basic point seems to be that the exercise of even the most eloquent ecstatic speech is no more than empty noise if it is expressed without God's love.

In verse 2, Paul's comparisons have to do with prophecy and with faith. In the Bible, prophecy is not generally so much concerned with foretelling the future as with forthtelling God's word for the present situation, though both meanings are true and have relevance here. Paul is basically saying something like this: "Even if I know everything about everything, even if I know all there is to know about God's purposes in the present and in the future, but don't have love, *I am nothing.*"

Paul's use of the phrase, "*faith that can move mountains*" seems to be a reference to an idiom Jesus used for the ability to do what is humanly impossible,¹² and Paul's point remains the same: even the most remarkable gifts and abilities have no value whatsoever if they are exercised without love. Persons who behave so, Paul points out, are not "Big Shots." They are **NOTHING**S. "Read my lips," he says—"NOTHINGS."

In verse 3, Paul lifts up some of the most astounding acts of faith that humans could ever make—giving everything they possess to benefit the poor and giving their bodies as sacrifices for their faith. With respect to the poor, I expect that we all have discovered that it's possible to do

⁹ Garland, p. 609.

¹⁰ Blomberg, p. 259.

¹¹ Renihan, pp. 34-35.

¹² See Matthew 17:19-20, 21:21; Mark 11:22-24; Luke 17:6.

what we sometimes call “charity work” with a bad attitude.¹³ Since “charity” *means* “love,” to do the first without the second is obviously a mistake.

Paul’s second example about our bodies can be translated “give over to hardship,” “give over to boasting,” or “give over to be burned.” Commentators are disagreed about which is the best translation, but it seems that most go with “to be burned,” apparently referring to the horribly cruel death that ISIS is sometimes imposing on their prisoners even now.¹⁴

Whatever Paul had in mind, he was apparently thinking of the very worst that could possibly happen, either with regard to one’s possessions or with regard to one’s body, and pointing out that no matter how astounding the sacrifice, without love, there is no profit in such sacrifice at all.¹⁵

I have two young friends, one of them my niece, who have spent two years working at one of the L’Arche communities in Washington, DC. As you may know, L’Arche is a global Christian community that provides residential care for persons with severe disabilities. One of these persons was a seventy-six year-old woman named Françoise, who had the nickname, “Mamie.”

Mamie had serious mental and physical disabilities. She was blind, bedridden, and incontinent. She couldn’t feed or dress herself. She was unable to communicate through words. Showing unconditional love to Mamie wasn’t easy, and one of the staff, a young man named Louis, found that he wasn’t drawn to her care.

Louis fed Mamie faithfully, as he was supposed to do, but he found it tiresome and unpleasant. After many months of such care, though, a day came when Mamie placed her hand on Louis’ hand and smiled at him. It was a magical moment, a moment of transformation, a moment of grace; and from that moment on, Louis loved being with Mamie. What had been tiresome became a blessing. Love had made the difference.

Sometime later, a guest visited that L’Arche community and, when she saw Mamie, weak, blind, and helpless, she callously asked Louis, “What’s the point of keeping her alive?” Louis replied, “If there were no other reason, *because I love her.*”¹⁶ That’s what Paul was talking about.

In the summer of 2003, David Timothy bought an old van with 265,000 miles on it. He and his wife dubbed it “the Soup Mobile” and started taking food to the homeless of Dallas, Texas.

Timothy had wanted to open a soup kitchen for a long time, partly because he grew up poor and hungry himself, though he had never been homeless. Through volunteers, donations from restaurants and grocery stores, and his own willingness to devote 60-70 hours a week to the ministry, Timothy provides over 3,000 meals each month in the Name of Jesus.

One homeless woman said, “Timothy does things for us that other people would not do, like bring us food, clothes, water, juice, cakes, dog food, and blankets. Timothy even brings toys for our children on their birthdays.” A homeless man commented, “Timothy don’t have to come

¹³ “Charity” is an Old English word for “love,” and the King James Version uses “charity” here where modern translations use “love.”

¹⁴ And we should remember that, during the years of the Inquisition, “Christians” did the same thing.

¹⁵ F. W. Grosheide, “The First Epistle to the Corinthians,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 306.

¹⁶ Adapted from Peter Scazzero, “Twenty-six Years of Lessons at NLF,” a sermon delivered at New Life Fellowship on 29 September 2013.

out here, but he does come out here *because he's got God in him.*¹⁷ That's what Paul was talking about, too.

Some of you have been wondering about the background to today's PowerPoint, especially the equation $5-1 = 0$. Well, here's what that's about. The five things in that equation are these:

1. Speaking with the tongues of men and of angels
2. Having the gift of prophecy and understanding all mysteries and all knowledge
3. Having sufficient faith to move mountains
4. Giving all of your property to the poor
5. Sacrificing your body for the cause of Christ

And as you may now guess, the "1" represents love. Actually, in the mathematics of Heaven, it doesn't matter how large a number comes before the "1." If there is no love in that number, the outcome is zero. Nothing.

Chrysostom, a famous preacher of the 4th century, pointed out that "If we all loved one another and each of us was so beloved, no human being would ever injure another. Think of it! Murders, strife, wars, divisions, plundering, fraud, all evils would be removed. If we truly loved one another, there would be neither slave nor free, neither ruler nor ruled, neither rich nor poor, neither small nor great. There would be no poverty, no unbounded wealth, if there were love."¹⁸

What Chrysostom described is what God intends to be the case on this tiny blue orb hurtling through the vastness of space. That's what the Kingdom of God looks like. That's what we were put here to build.

Some of you may still be wondering about the title of this sermon, "*Sine qua non.*" This Latin phrase has several definitions, including "an indispensable condition, element or factor," "something essential," and "**something without which there is nothing.**" That's Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3: *Without Love, there is Nothing.*¹⁹

And so, my friend, what is there about you that makes you useful in the body of Christ? In what area or areas are you especially gifted? How are you using those abilities as expressions of love for God's children in this world? How are you using those abilities to do them genuine good, to encourage them in their faith? How are you actively involved in "pushing back the Darkness"?

God *has* made you as you are for God's own reasons. God has allowed certain experiences in your life, and God's Spirit has given you distinct and particular gifts. That's the point of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12, and these gifts God has placed in your life are tools for building up the Church (Ephesians 4:12), not for crafting a stage on which to display your own specialness. And yes, we should tend to our tools, keep them in good shape, and sharpen their effectiveness. But we should always remember what they're really *for.*²⁰

¹⁷ "Soupman," www.yahoo.com, 24 November 2004.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, *The Love Chapter: The Meaning of First Corinthians 13* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2010), pp. 16-17, 19.

¹⁹ We might well say that this statement is true in the ultimate sense. Were God not Love, there would be Nothing. There would have been no Creation. There would have been no Redemption. Only Darkness "on the face of the Deep."

²⁰ May, p. 22.

In 1969, Malcolm Muggeridge went to Calcutta to make a documentary film about Mother Teresa for the BBC. She didn't want to do it, but church leaders finally persuaded her. When she finally agreed, she told Muggeridge, "*Let us do something beautiful for God.*"

The light in Mother Teresa's hospital was marginal for filming, and Muggeridge was concerned that the results wouldn't be usable. But when he looked at the film, he saw that the whole project was bathed in what could only be called a soft, beautiful radiance. Muggeridge decided that God had caused the film to record the radiance of love that he had sensed in that hospital, and he eventually became a follower of Jesus as a result. Later, he wrote a book about Mother Teresa and called it *Something Beautiful for God*.²¹

My friends, love is the very nature of God. Love is the unseen force that energizes the universe. Love holds the universe together at this very moment (Colossians 1:15-20). And because this is true, love is the very heart of Christian experience. *We love others because God has loved us first* (1 John 4:11).

Justice without love is legalism. Faith without love is fanaticism. Hope without love is self-centeredness. Courage without love is recklessness. Generosity without love is extravagance. Care without love is duty. Every true virtue is an expression of love, and no action is truly virtuous unless it is filled, empowered, and transformed by love.²² **Let's do something beautiful for God!**

²¹ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (HarperOne, 1971, 2003).

²² Richard McBrien, "Catholicism," *Christianity Today*, vol. 40, no. 1.