

LOVE IS INDISPENSABLE

1 Corinthians 13

Online Sermon: http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567

Even though all Scripture is God-breathed and therefore useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16); some Scriptures such as the “Love Chapter” seem to speak to our hearts and prick our consciousness more than others. Few people would disagree with Adolf Harnack who called this chapter “the greatest, strongest and deepest thing that Paul ever wrote.”¹ So profound is this passage that John Wesley has noted that even those who deny the authority of the Holy Scriptures have been drawn and have included the principles of this passage in their “religion of choice.”²

While the content of this chapter are echoed in most weddings and memorials this passage only goes beyond noble, exalted words, when interpreted in light of the weaknesses, gaps, failures and sins of the Christian community at Corinth.³ Paul’s words were meant to humble the people of Corinth and remind them that their outward ministry success was useless in God’s sight if not done in love. Those who have experienced God’s love were to now “see people as those for whom Christ died, the objects of God’s love, and therefore the objects of the love of God’s people.”⁴ Part 1 of this sermon series will examine five levels (verses 1-3) or outward signs of spiritual health that for Paul are useless without love. The second part of this sermon series (verses 4-13) will define what love is and what it is not and conclude by examining Paul’s statement that love never fails.

The Five Levels of Spiritual Health Are Useless without Love

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. ² 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. ³ If I give all I possess to

¹ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 174.

² John Wesley, *Sermons, on Several Occasions* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999).

³ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 226.

⁴ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 174.

the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3, NIV



Ever since you became a Christian I hope you have wanted to grow and become more mature in the faith. I love this picture of a tree growing in a dry parched land for this is exactly what we as Christians are called to do. We live in a fallen world that does not love God and hates the narrow path. To be an effective ambassador and royal priest of God is something we all strive towards but few obtain. The closer we get to God the more spiritually mature we become and therefore the greater our light shines in both words and deed. Ever wonder what it would be like to

become so mature that, like Moses, God decides to talk with you face to face, as one friend speaks to another (Exodus 33:11)? Hearing God speak from a raging whirlwind like He did for Job (38:1) or in a gentle whisper like He did for Elijah (1 Kings 19:12), or to be taken up into heaven to see visions like Paul, Isaiah or John are outward signs of closeness to God that most Christians can only imagine. If one is experiencing these and others indicators of spiritual maturity can one confidently claim one is getting closer to God?

To answer this question, Paul states that any outward sign of spiritual maturity is false when it is not done in love. John Wesley believes the first three verses contain what for Paul must have been progressive, outward levels of spiritual maturity.⁵

1. **Speak in Tongues.** For John Wesley and others,⁶ the “tongues of men and angels” certainly refers to the gift of tongues but does not necessarily exclude speech of any other kind. When we become a new Creation the first thing Wesley believes changes is the words we choose to speak. To the church of Ephesus Paul wrote there was to be “no foolish talk nor crude joking” (5:4) come out of the Christians mouth. For James those who cannot bridle their tongues their religion becomes useless (1:26). The more we study God’s word and stay in commune with Him the more likely our hearts and the very words we speak will be given to us by God. Paul states that even if one could



⁵ John Wesley, *Sermons, on Several Occasions* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999).

⁶ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 175.

speaking with the spiritual gift of tongues, if the words were not spoken in love they would only be heard by God as a shrill sound similar to two metal basins banged against each other.⁷ They certainly will make sound that can be heard and maybe even admired by humanity but words spoken without love are only noise to God!

2. **Mysteries and Knowledge.** Ever since the beginning of time humanity has been constantly seeking to find an explanation for everything both present and in the future. Since only those with the Spirit can know and accept the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14), the moment a person is born again they have access to a knowledge of God that was previously unknowable to them. According to Saint Augustine knowledge and application of easier passages of Scripture opens the doors to understanding more complex passages. The more spiritual truths one knows and applies the greater one's spiritual maturity. Even if one's knowledge increased to the level that one could explain the mysteries in the books of Daniel, Ezekiel or Revelation; without love one would not gain favour with God. Even if one could understand all things human or divine without love one will always remain nothing in the eyes of God.



3. **Faith that can Move Mountains.** For Wesley faith is greater than knowledge because without faith we are not saved.⁸ Even the demons (James 2:19) and the Pharisees (Matthew 23) had knowledge of God but that did not mean they were part of God's kingdom. It is by the grace of God and through one's faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ (John 3:16) that a person is adopted into His kingdom. Faith for Wesley is also greater than knowledge because without faith we can do nothing in God's kingdom. Paul states that even if your faith is like a mustard seed and you can tell a mountain to cast itself into the sea, without love a person remains nothing in the eyes of God.



⁷ Douglas J. Moo, "The Letters and Revelation," in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 2350.

⁸ John Wesley, *Sermons, on Several Occasions* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999).

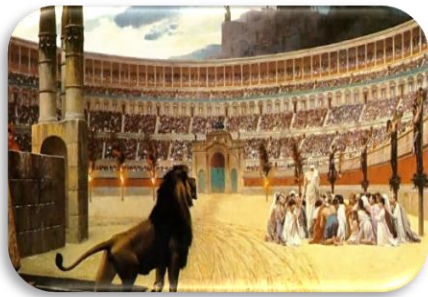
4. **Good Works.** While faith is necessary for our salvation, Wesley finds that the next step in spiritual maturity is to put one's faith into action. We were created in Christ (Ephesians 2:9)



to do the works that glorify God the Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). While works cannot save a person Jesus states that by our fruits you will know whether a person is a Christian or not (Matthew 7:16). In verse three the good works Paul focuses on is giving away the material wealth we have. Even though we are told to not store treasures on this earth (Matthew 6:19-21) we often hoard the material things of this world as if they were our own. Knowing that giving to others is like giving to Christ (Matthew 25:40) is often not enough motivation to get us to part with our abundant

possessions that we will never use. Paul states that even if one were spiritually mature enough to sell all one has and give the money to the poor, if it is not done in love it would not gain a person anything in the eyes of God.

5. **Suffering for Righteousness Sake.** The final level of spiritual maturity for Wesley is to voluntarily submit to persecution or death for righteousness sake.⁹ While Jesus clearly teaches us that we will be persecuted (John 15:20) for introducing the fallen world to His glorious light



(John 3:20), not all Christians are willing to suffer or to be Martyrs. If you lived during Emperor Nero's time (54-68 AD) would you be willing to say that you were a Christian knowing full well that it would probably mean that you would be torn apart by dogs or lit on fire for their entertainment? If you lived during the time of Decius (249-251 AD) would you refuse to sacrifice to Roman gods and the emperor knowing full well that it would mean your instant execution? While we may not be asked to die for righteousness sake are we truly willing to live and preach the

Gospel message knowing that it will most likely lead to loosing out on promotions or severing relationships with friends and family? For Paul, even if we did die for righteousness sake without love we would gain nothing!

⁹ John Wesley, *Sermons, on Several Occasions* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999).

Conclusion

I am not necessarily convinced that the first three verses contain what for Paul must have been progressive, outward levels of spiritual maturity. I think John Wesley has an interesting thesis that may have some merit. Even if you do not agree with him, Paul has listed some of the most impressive spiritual feats that any Christian could ever obtain to prove a point. Even when we speak with the tongues of angels, attain all the knowledge humanly possible of God, have faith that can move a mountain, give all our possessions to the poor, or ultimately be willing to be put to death for righteousness sake; without love these outward signs of spiritual maturity are false and worthless to God. In the next part of this series we are going to explore Paul's definition of love and his profound statement that love alone never fails.