

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:31; 13:1-3 (Pew Bible, pg.1137)

Title: “You Ain’t Nothin’ If You Ain’t Lovin’”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – Several years ago I read the true story of a teenager by the name of Arthur Hinkley who lifted a three-thousand pound tractor with his bare hands. But Arthur Hinkley was not a weight-lifter. He was just a friend to another teenager named Lloyd Bachelder, who was suddenly pinned underneath a tractor on a farm near Rome, Maine. Arthur heard Lloyd’s scream and ran to his rescue. He was able to do something that a teenager isn’t typically able to do. He lifted the tractor off the ground just enough for Lloyd to wiggle out. What was it that enabled Arthur Hinkley to do the impossible? It was the power of love. And that’s what I want us to talk about through these summer months.

One of the Bible’s simplest descriptions of God is that “God is love.”

1 John 4:16 - And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

It is perhaps the most endearing characteristic of God. But love is also one of the simplest and most profound descriptions of our life in God is love. The verse says, “Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.”

We’re going to spend the next several weeks exploring one the most vivid, detailed descriptions of this love found in the Word of God ... I Corinthians 13. Go ahead and turn to that passage in your Bible. And as you do let me just remind you of some truths that we know about this love.

Love is the Holy Spirit’s energy in the life of a Christ-follower. And the source of this love, this energy, is the Gospel.

ILLUSTRATION – The main source of our planet’s energy is that huge ball in the eastern sky this morning ... the sun. It is 93 million miles from the earth, but the energy that relentlessly radiates from the sun is the energy that sustains our planet.

And the energy of the Christian life is love. And it has as its source an event that happen 2000 years ago ... the Christ event when God sent forth His Son to live among us, die for our sins, rise again from the dead, ascend to the right hand of the Father, sending in turn the Holy Spirit. That event called the Gospel is the source of this love that resides in us now as believers. It is the energy of the Christian life.

This Spirit-inspired love is the energy of our relationship with God. We are told to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. And this Spirit-inspired love is also the energy of our relationship with others. The Bible goes on to say that we are to love others as we love ourselves.

And this amazing love described here in I Corinthians 13, and in other parts of the Bible, is not the product of human goodwill. This is supernatural energy that comes from the overwhelming influence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ living in us.

Galatians 5:22-23 - But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Romans 5:5 - God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Jesus teaches us as His followers that the most basic expression of our discipleship is this:

John 13:34-35 - “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

It’s easy to get so caught up in all of the dos and don’ts of the Bible. It can easily become an overwhelming, dominating check-list that we can’t keep up with. But the Bible simplifies it all for us:

Galatians 5:6 - The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Now we come to I Corinthians 13. Actually I want to start with the last verse of I Corinthians 12.

1 Corinthians 12:31 (NIV) - But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

Now this verses helps us keep the context of I Corinthians 13 in view so that we can understand it properly. I’ve entitled this series, “The Power of Love.” And we will talk about the power of love at work in our marriages and in our families. But that is just one application. I Corinthians 13 was written to a church fellowship that was struggling to live out love in their church. The fact is that I Corinthians is a rather stern, rebuking letter written to a church that had more problems than you could imagine. One of the problems in the church that Paul spends much of his letter dealing with has to do with the way their worship services were conducted. There was great confusion in the church about how spiritual gifts were to function. Some considered that their particular spiritual abilities and ministries made them superior to other people in the church. Still others felt vastly inferior because they didn’t possess those remarkable gifts. So here was a church that was loaded with gifted and knowledgeable members; but they were missing one vital ingredient ... love!

In fact, I Corinthians 12:31 is probably not a command, but more of an observation about the Corinthian believers, and a rebuke to them. “You people eagerly desire the ‘greater gifts.’ You clamor after the gifts that draw attention to you and make you feel superior to other people.”

But there is a more excellent way. And that way is the way of love.

Now let’s go on to read the first verses in I Corinthians 13. Read vv.1-3.

By the way, we're going to work on memorizing a portion of I Corinthians 13 over the course of the series. I've prepared a bookmark for you to slip in your Bible and refer to it as you memorize these verses over the next several weeks.

I've entitled my message "You Ain't Nothin' If You Ain't Lovin'." I know that's horribly improper grammar, but maybe that will grab your attention. It's exactly what Paul is saying in the first verses of I Corinthians 13. Everything we do must be done for the glory of God and for the good of others. That's the essence of this amazing *agape* love.

What happens when love is absent from our lives and our relationships? Paul develops some hypothetical situations that may seem to be the ultimate in performance, but without love it amounts to nothing.

1. SPEAKING WITHOUT LOVE PRODUCES NOTHING (v.1).

1 Corinthians 13:1 - If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

A huge part of our life and our relationships has to do with our words and our speaking. It's hard to function without speaking. If you don't believe that, just try going a day without speaking to anyone. It's pretty tough. And it's hard to successfully get through a day without people speaking to us. Communication is so important. It's important in our homes, on our jobs, and in our church.

In fact, Paul may have had in mind the kind of communicating that went on in the church in Corinth. As you may recall there was an issue in the church in Corinth about what is called "speaking in tongues" or "speaking in unknown tongues" that could not be understood by others without an interpreter. The Corinthian church thought this was a sign of superior spirituality, and often a person would start speaking like this in a worship service with no consideration for what others were saying, and with no concern that others did not even know what he's saying.

Pagan religions that existed at the time of the NT practiced this sort of thing accompanied by smashing gongs, clanging cymbals and blasting trumpets.

The purpose of our speaking to others should be for the glory of God and the good of others ... to show our love for God and for others. The power of love is the power behind all meaningful speech. But when there is any other motivation for our speaking we are of no more help to them than resounding gongs and clanging cymbals.

ILLUSTRATION – When our mates, or our kids, or our colleagues, or fellow believers hear us speak to them is it something that is sweet to their ears? Does it minister God's grace and mercy to them so that they are encouraged or comforted? Or as we speak to people is it just irritating ... like a clanging cymbal.

So we must learn to speak with love. Speaking without love produces nothing. The next thing is...

2. ABILITY WITHOUT LOVE IS NOTHING (v.2).

1 Corinthians 13:2 - 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 have not love, I am nothing.

Here Paul is describing three spiritual gifts or supernatural abilities that are included in a list of spiritual gifts back in I Corinthians 12. Paul continues to speak in hypothetical terms and he describes what might be considered a bionic believer ... a person so extraordinarily gifted far beyond what anyone could imagine.

“If I have the gift of prophecy...” - They have the gift of prophecy. Paul says in I Corinthians 14 that prophecy is the greatest of the gifts, as well as an important office in the early church. This gift of prophecy is not so much “fore-telling” as it is “forth-telling.” It is powerful communication that exhorts others toward faithfulness to God.

Now I know this gift has been exercised when someone speaks something in a sermon or some other setting and immediately I get the sense that God has spoken to me. That’s prophecy.

I may think I’m something if I have this ability, but if it is not motivated by love for God and others I am nothing.

“And can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge...” - Notice “all.” This is the ability to know and discern things that most people have trouble grasping.

You’ve heard it said, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” My knowledge can come across as smug intellectual snobbery. The Bible says that knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

“And if I have a faith that can move mountains...” - We’re talking here about the gift of faith. It is the ability to see what God wants to do and to lay hold of it by faith and encourage others to do the same.

I can’t imagine anything more important in the Christian life than faith? It is the key that unlocks the door to the promises of God. And yet I can have all the faith in the world, but if I’m motivated by selfish agenda to draw attention to myself ... if it is not motivated by seeking the glory of God and the good of others, it is nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:13 - And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I may think I’m something, but I’m really nothing. In God’s economy of things ability without love is nothing. I must learn to serve with love.

ILLUSTRATION - Since an elite team of Navy SEALs found and killed Osama bin Laden last month, there has been a great deal of interest in the Navy SEALs. In a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal*, Eric Greitens, a former Navy SEAL, talked about how one makes it into this elite

group. The training the SEALs go through is the hardest military training in the world. The classes start out large, and include lots of high-school and college athletes, national-champion swimmers, and top-ranked wrestlers and boxers, but only 10-20 percent of the men who begin the SEALs training actually finish. And what kind of man makes it through that torturous training? Eric Greitens says that there are a dozen types that usually fail: “The weight-lifting meatheads who think that the size of their biceps is an indication of their strength ... the preening leaders who don't want to get dirty, and the look-at-me former athletes who have always been told they are stars In short, those who fail are the ones who focus on show.”

But he goes on to say that some men who seemed impossibly weak at the beginning of SEAL training actually made it. He said, “Almost all the men who survived possessed one common quality. Even in great pain, faced with the test of their lives, they had the ability to step outside of their own pain, put aside their own fear and ask: How can I help the guy next to me? They had a heart large enough to think about others, to dedicate themselves to a higher purpose.”

We must learn to speak with love and to serve with love. But there's something else:

3. GIVING WITHOUT LOVE GAINS NOTHING (v.3).

Now here again is another hypothetical situation.

1 Corinthians 13:3 - If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Agape love is always involves self-sacrifice, but not all self-sacrifice is motivated by a love for the glory of God and the good of others. Sometimes it is self-serving and self-seeking.

“If I give all I possess to the poor...” – This means to gradually give away everything one possesses until you eventually have nothing. What could be wrong with this?

You know, there is actually a refreshing movement today among believers that challenges us to take back the Christian faith from the so-called American dream. That is, believers are beginning to understand that as American believers we have become very self-centered even in our faith, and we think that God and the church exist for our comfort and convenience. This movement is challenging believers to confront materialism and look for ways to simplify their lives so they can give more away for the expanding of the Kingdom of God. I can't imagine a more needed challenge to today's American church.

But as noble as that is, if it isn't motivated by love for God and love for others, it really gains nothing.

“If ... I surrender my body to the flames...” – He's talking here about what would appear to be the ultimate sacrifice ... to give one's life for a cause. He's talking here about an agonizing death, probably by martyrdom.

One of the things that we value as a church is the importance of sharing our faith in Christ with others. Many of us have been praying the prayer of Acts 4:29, “Lord consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.” Of course was the prayer of the early church as they were faced with great opposition to speaking for Christ.

Another thing our church values is missions ... crossing ethnic or language or cultural barriers to take the Gospel to people far from God. And some who do that experience great difficulty; some have even died for it.

But if our motive behind our evangelism and our missions is not love for God and for others, then we gain nothing.

We must learn to *speak* with love, *serve* with love and *sacrifice* with love.

CONCLUSION

So life minus love equals zero. God isn't telling us here that it isn't important to speak truth to others ... just do it with a love for the glory of God and the good of others. The Bible isn't telling us that we shouldn't desire to have spiritual gifts like prophecy or knowledge or faith ... just desire those gifts for the love of the glory of God and the good of others. The Bible doesn't say it is wrong to give away everything you have to help others ... just do it for the glory of God and the good of others. It's not wrong to give up your life ... just do it for the glory of God and the good of others.

I Corinthians 14:1 in the Living Bible says, “Make love your greatest aim.”