

1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most well-known and well loved passages of the entire Bible. It's often used at weddings, because we like to talk about love. We like the feeling of love. But the love that Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 13 is not a feeling, Christians. It is more than that. It is a love which is seen in action, which is seen in what we do. In other words, it is Christian love. And no matter how good of a Christian we may appear to be on the outside, if we don't have love, then we are no Christians at all.

And to really understand what Paul means by this chapter, we have to set it into its context, especially in chapter 12. And Paul begins chapter 12 by talking about spiritual gifts. These were the gifts that the Holy Spirit gave to the Church for the building up of the Church. And in the early Church, those gifts included things like miraculous healing, included things like miracle working, even speaking in tongues, to be able to speak in a language that you didn't actually know. And these gifts were common in the early Church. Even the church in Corinth had many of these gifts among them.

But the problem was that they were divided about it. They weren't using them in the way that they should. Because they had become attracted to the impressive gifts, especially a gift like speaking in tongues. And they started to think that those who had this gift were the real Christians. They were the ones who had the Spirit. They were the ones who were able to do and understand all things. They had become so focused on the outward appearance that they had forgotten everything else as a result.

And Paul tells them in chapter 12 that this was a mistake. They all had the Spirit. You know that because no one's able to say that they believe in Jesus without the Holy Spirit. And more than that, they were all united into the same body. Yes, they were different parts of that body. Some of them were eyes, some of them were hands, some of them were feet, it was true. But they were all still one. They were all still united together. And even if the eye was a very important gift, even if the eye was a very impressive thing, it still needed the hands. It still needed the feet. But the problem was that the eyes of the church were exalting themselves, saying that they were the most important, excluding everyone else. And as a result, they were not living as the Christians that they were called to be. They were squabbling. They were fighting. They were bickering with one another. They were even wanting the praise and the admiration of those around them. And this was the source of many of their problems. Paul was not saying, of course, that the gifts were somehow useless or unimportant. To be an eye is a very great thing! But to be an eye without love? That's a very dangerous thing indeed.

And Christians, God still gives to us today many of these same gifts. Yes, it's true that some of them have come to an end: gifts like miracle working, gifts like speaking in tongues, gifts like miraculous healing. The Spirit, for whatever reason he has chosen for himself, has stopped giving these gifts to the Church. But that doesn't mean that he's stopped giving them altogether. In fact, there are many gifts which he still gives to us today: a gift like understanding the Word, a gift like having great wisdom from the Lord, a gift like being able to discern what is right and what is wrong, to be able to discern the truth from falsehood. These are still gifts that he gives to us today. And not all of us have these gifts in the same measure, Christians. Some of us have a very deep understanding of the Word. Some of us have very great wisdom from the Lord. Some of us are able to tell the difference between truth and error very easily. But he gives these gifts

for the building up of the Church, so that we can help one another, so that we can support one another and teach each other in the Lord.

And honestly, we should seek after these gifts for ourselves. God wants us to ask for them. As Paul says in chapter 12, verse 31: "Earnestly desire the higher gifts." We should pray for an understanding of the Word. We should pray for the gift of discernment. We should pray to be able to know the things of God. These are good things to have, wonderful gifts that we can seek after. But the question we have to ask ourselves is this: why? Why do you want that gift? Do you want that gift to be able to help others, to be able to help build up the Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit? Or do you want that gift so that others will admire you, so that they will boast about you and so that you can be puffed up? Because the difference between those two questions, Christians, is love.

And that's why Paul goes on in our reading for today in verses 1 through 3: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." Even if I have the very greatest gift that the Spirit could possibly give to me, if I don't have love, then I have nothing. If I were able to speak the language of angels, Paul says, to be able to know something that no human being has ever known, something that even the apostles themselves could only dream of having, that would be a very great gift from the Lord. But if I only used it for my own advantage, then I might as well be babbling, making noise, not saying anything at all. If I understood everything about the Bible and were able to even predict what God was going to do in the future, to be able to prophesy about what is to come, that would be a very great gift indeed. But if I used it in order to gloat over others, then I am nothing. And if I gave away all of my possessions, so that I had nothing left, and if I even gave up my own body to be burned, burned at the stake for Jesus, but I only did it so that I could glory in myself, then I gain nothing. The greatest gift which God gives, Christians, is nothing without love. And this love is not just a feeling. It's not just this warm, fuzzy feeling towards other people. Love shows itself in what I do. Love is what I do. And the gifts which God gives to his Church are given for the sake of this love.

And we can see this love, Paul says, as he goes on in verses 4 through 7: "Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Now, keep those gifts in mind as we read what Paul is talking about here, about Christian love. Because if I have a particular gift, but don't have love and don't act in this way, what does that say about me? If I have a deep understanding of the Bible, but I become impatient with those who don't, what does that say about me? If I have great wisdom from God, but then I boast about it over others, what does that say about me? And if I can carefully discern truth from error, but I become angry and bitter and resentful because of it, what does that say about me? How can we, in each case, say that we have love? Love is what I do, Christians. Love is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Because this love, Paul says, goes on forever. "Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." All of these other things that Paul has been talking about will eventually come to an end. The gifts of God will eventually have fulfilled their purpose. When Jesus returns on the Last Day, there won't be any more need for these gifts. Because then we will be perfect. Then we will be mature in the Lord. And the way of childhood will give way to spiritual adulthood forever. But this love, this love will go on. And if I don't have that love now, then what do I have? This is why he finishes the way he does in verse 13: "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love." Love is the greatest thing, Christians, because we will continue to love one another even in eternity.

So let us show this love to one another now, because we are one in Christ Jesus. Jesus first loved us by giving himself for our sins while we were still his enemies. Jesus has made us one through the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we are united with one another. So let us seek the gifts of God in the service of this love, seeking to help one another and to build each other up. But let us also run after love, serving one another, because we are one body in Jesus Christ our Lord. Without love, we are nothing. But with love, we are one in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have united us together in your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to love one another as he has first loved us, so that we may do what is pleasing in your sight. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.