

Charity And Its Fruits: Better Than Miracles
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

August 26, 2018

SI: In one of the generosity sermons I mentioned how Jonathan Edwards called heaven a world of love. That's from a famous book of his titled: Charity and Its Fruits. It's about 1 Corinthians 13.

So what we're going to look at for the next five or six weeks is 1 Corinthians 13. The love chapter.

I'm going to be using a little Jonathan Edwards and more than a little Tim Keller as we look for several weeks at this most beautiful chapter.

I'm just going to focus on the first three verses, but let's read the whole thing.

INTRO: Where do you usually hear 1 Corinthians 13 read? Weddings.

It's always been a popular wedding passage.

I guess that next to the 23rd Psalm and the Lord's Prayer—

this is the third most well-known passage in the whole Bible.

And now these three remain: Faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I'm sure that in Christian bookstores around the world you can find those words on a plaque or poster.

Because this is such a powerful chapter, we tend to think of it as a stand alone piece of literature, like a poem.

As if Paul were sitting around one day, reflective, pondering what is love?

What is God's love in us? And then writing this as an expression of meditation.

But it's actually part of a letter he wrote to a church, the church in the Greco-Roman city of Corinth.

It's 1 Corinthians 13, because 12 chapters come before it and three chapters after.

So there's a context for this chapter. This chapter is part of a story.

Paul was having a conversation with a young church.

The Corinth church was about four or five years old at the time.

And unless you understand the story behind the letter you won't understand that this the love chapter, is actually a stunning rebuke.

It's a dash of cold water in the face.

Paul deliberately says some things in a very blunt manner that no doubt hurt them and shook them in a good way.

As I said, we've heard these words so often in settings like weddings

that they sound soothing to us. I memorized 1 Cor 13 as a boy in KJV

If I speak with the tongues of men or of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge.

And we say, Ahh—that's so wonderful. That's so soothing.

But the people who got this didn't have that impression.

They heard something else, and unless you hear what they heard, then you haven't really gotten the Holy Spirit's message in this chapter.

This a rebuke, it's a bombshell. Paul is saying something to get their attention.

Three headings: the story, the rebuke, the application

Credit where credit is due. Sermon by Dr. Tim Keller on this passage.

MP#1 The story

The city of Corinth was in a geographically unique place.

It was located on a narrow spit of land just four miles wide that connected all of northern Greece and all of southern Greece. Look at a map, you'll see. So all the commerce and traffic between northern and southern Greece had to go through Corinth.

It would be as if all the interstate highways in America had to go through one bottleneck where there was one major city.

Also, if cargo ships were sailing east to west, from Greece to Rome, they could sail all the way around the southern tip of Greece, or they could unload their cargo at Corinth, have it hauled four miles over land and loaded on a ship on the other side, saving many days of shipping. It was like an ancient Panama Canal. So north to south, east to west—by sea or by land, Corinth was at the crossroads and was a commercial hub.

But in 146 BC Corinth was leveled by the Romans for rebellion.

And for about a hundred years it was uninhabited until the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar realized what a gold mine it would be so he re-established the city. He made it a Roman colony.

Motivated people from all over the empire moved there to make a fortune.

Retired military men moved there to start second careers in lucrative businesses.

Hungry young merchants moved there to build shipping houses.

Corinth was a melting pot of Romans, Greeks, Jews and people from all over.

There was no aristocracy. There were no bluebloods in Corinth.

Everybody there had one thing in common, they wanted to make it big.

They wanted to live large and to flaunt it and indulge themselves.

On the highest point in the city was the temple of Aphrodite which was world-famous for its prostitutes.

It was a success-oriented, money-hungry, sex-obsessed city.

There was actually a word coined that was based on the Corinthian way of life.

Corinthianize. It meant to live large and flaunt it and indulge yourself.

You know that marketing slogan: What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.

That's kind of like Corinthianize.

But the Corinthians weren't just partiers.

Corinth attracted driven, talented, visionary people and those who stayed were the people who made it.

Before Paul came to Corinth he had been in Athens.

There he was ridiculed by the philosophers for his message of a risen Savior.

A few people were converted, but it doesn't seem he was able to plant a church. So he must have been wondering what was going to happen in Corinth.

Acts 18:9-10 says:

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."

Paul, I'm still with you, and I'm going to show you the power of the Gospel.

I'm going to plant a church in the least likely city in the Roman Empire.

The last place in the world where you think people would turn to the Lord. Corinth. I'm going to save a church full of Corinthianizers. The Lord did.

There's a place in 1 Corinthians 6 where Paul says:

the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers . . . And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

This was not a Bible Belt congregation.

These were people who had seen everything and done everything.

But when the Corinthians were converted, they became a unique church.

Corinth was Paul's most brilliant church and his most troubled church.

Out of all Paul's churches, none that had so many talented people.

Because the people who came to Corinth were people who came to make it big.

They were talented communicators, experts in their fields, visionary planners.

You see this hinted at in the opening verses of chap 13.

Speaking with tongues of men and angels, all wisdom, mountain moving faith.

As these talented people came into the church they also developed spiritual gifts.

More people with miraculous gifts in Corinth than any other church.

More people speaking in tongues, revelations, healing—gifted, brilliant people.

But when you go to verses 4-7, love patient, kind, doesn't boast, not rude.

Where did Paul come up with that list? Paul, what is love? No.

Read 1 Corinthians carefully, will notice all these words used earlier.

He calls them puffed up, self-seeking, rude. Paul was in quandary.

His most brilliant church was his most troubled church.

The church where people were doing the most and who had the most gifts.

And probably the church with the most miracles, was also the church with the most jealousy, pride, divisions, fighting, moral lapses.

So Paul writes a letter and drops a bombshell of a rebuke in chapter 13.

MP#2 The rebuke

You can have spiritual gifts, even miraculous spiritual gifts, and not be a Christian at all.

You can speak in tongues, have revelations and spiritual insights, you can be so excited and visionary you are able to move mountains, you can be so flat out committed to your church that you are ready to die for it, you can be so radically committed to helping the poor that you give away tremendous amounts of money

You can do all these things and not just be spiritually immature, but nothing at all. All these things can be operating in your life and you can be a spiritual zero.

Paul's not down on spiritual gifts. Later he says I have these gifts myself. But he says: Your theology is terribly confused. So your priorities are all wrong. You think these spiritual gifts are the greatest thing.

But don't you realize all these gifts can be present in a non-Christian? Don't you realize that a person who is in the church but who hasn't been born again can practice all these spiritual gifts you are putting so much stock in?

There is lots of biblical evidence for this.

Matthew 7:22-23, the most sobering words of Christ for church-going people.

Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?'²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

There will be people on the day of judgment who prophesied, preached, did miracles in Christ's name but who are judged spiritual nothings.

There are a number of examples in the Bible, Old and New Testament.

Balaam in the Old Testament. The Bible is clear that he was a wicked man.

He was responsible for some gross immorality that troubled Israel.

In the New Testament Balaam is used as an example of immorality in church. But he was also a prophet. And the Lord actually spoke through Balaam to reveal some important truths and messages to God's people.

King Saul, whose life we studied last year in sermon series on 1 Samuel.

The Spirit of God actually came on Saul several times to gift him for kingship and enable him to perform some great feats of leadership at key periods.

Saul also prophesied several times.

But it becomes increasingly obvious that Saul is a spiritual nothing.

He doesn't know the Lord. He hasn't been born again.

The contrast between Saul's heart and David's heart main theme of 1 Samuel.

Even so, Saul was gifted with leadership and sometimes moved mountains.

In the New Testament the most striking example is Judas.

In Matthew 10 Jesus sends out the 12 Disciples, all 12.

He sends them out to preach the Gospel and he gives them power to heal the sick, raise the dead, and drive out demons.

And they did miracles. In the name of Christ, by power of Christ. Judas included.

But Judas never gave his heart to the Lord. Judas is in hell.

He's called the son of perdition.

Jonathan Edwards: "A spiritual gift of miracles or speaking, does not change a person's inherent nature. A gift ability does not require a change of heart as love or holiness does. Gifts are like precious jewels with which a body may be adorned, but which do not alter the body's form. But the grace of God and its fruit turns, as it were, the very soul into a precious jewel."

The Holy Spirit can give spiritual gifts to a person who has not been born again, but he cannot produce spiritual fruit in a person who is not born again.

He can give speaking abilities, counseling abilities, miraculous abilities to anybody, but he can only give love, patience, kindness, gentleness to people whose hearts have been changed by the Gospel.

That means love is more miraculous than miracles. Love is better than miracles.

Christian love, forgiveness, warmth—that only happens in hearts that have been supernaturally changed by grace of God.

But without any saving grace at all, people can have and use spiritual gifts.

The spiritual gifts are usually given to people who are born again but not always.

Because it doesn't take a supernatural work of grace in the heart to preach and prophesy, or to be sold out and committed to church, or to be a visionary leader or exciting teacher, or to give sacrificially to the poor, or even to do miracles.

But it does take a supernatural work of grace in the heart to become a person with a Christ-like character.

And that is the rebuke of 1 Corinthians 13.

You've made spiritual gifts the most important thing. You think they prove God approves of you. But without love, you're a spiritual zero.

Without love, those things are nothing.

Now let's apply this to ourselves.

MP#3 The application

Main people this is for is all of you who are most active in the church, all of you who are doing the most, involved the most, giving the most.

This is for everybody who is here at church whenever the doors are open,
all our teachers and volunteers, all our elders and deacons, our pastor.
If you've ever heard me preach a sermon and you've thought—
I wish so-and-so could hear this. He needs it. Well, this one is for you.

There is a tremendous danger, it is so easy—
Why does Paul say you can have and do all these things and be nothing?
Because the subtle danger for those of us active in the church,
active in ministry is to say in our hearts—look at the people I'm helping,
look at what I'm doing. I must be something.

Let me give you a negative example.

I realized a long time ago that sermon writing and delivery isn't dependent on
the level of grace in my life. In fact, the older I get, and the more experience
I have, the level of dependence on God for preaching goes down.

Even if I'm cold toward God, even if I've spent barely any time with him,
there's something about the Sunday morning deadline and then there's something
about actually standing up here in front of you that pulls out the gift.

You can deliver a sermon written by your own homiletical skill and delivered
from a cold heart, and people are still moved by it and helped by it and drawn
closer to Jesus through it. And here's the real danger.

When those people come up to me after church and say:

That sermon was just what I needed. Were you a fly on the wall of our home?
And this little voice in my head say: Andrew, you are something.

Why was that person touched and blessed? It had nothing to do with me.

It was the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.

It had no more to do with me than with Judas when he healed people.

I knew someone whose car gas gauge always said he had gas.

It would move but it would never go to empty, even when it was empty.

So he used other methods. Set his trip odometer every time he filled up.

He would have been a fool to say. I know I've gone 400 miles since I filled up
but it says I've still got half a tank so I'm ok

But that's what I do. Look at the people I'm helping and I know that's not
an accurate gauge for how I am with God, I sometimes tell self I'm ok.

It's easy it is to get your identity and sense of wellbeing from church activity and
Christian ministry. But it's a denial of grace. It's the opposite of the Gospel.

In the Gospel God says: I love you, not because of your activity, not because of
your talents and abilities and gifts. I love you because of my grace.

The danger of gifts is you say: God loves me because I'm good, not morally good.
But look the good I'm doing. I'm giving it all. I'm burned out. I'm something.

And when we look at the bigger story of the Corinthian church, we see that when a church full of people see it that way, it leads to irritability, peevishness, jealous, hurt feelings all over the place. People always getting toes stepped on. I wasn't recognized for this ministry. I wasn't asked to do that. Nobody noticed. Because your pride is in what you are doing. Criticized, devastated.

Peace and joy don't come from activity in ministry.
From grace of God in Jesus. God's love for you. Jesus dying and rising for you—not your gifts. If you look to them it smothers grace.
Are you are busy in the Lord's work but neglecting prayer life?
Are you are doing the work of the church but not a warm person?
Are you doing ministry but often discouraged or feeling unappreciated?
Then you aren't drawing off the love of God, delight in him. Drawing off gift.

Paul says then you're just a noisy gong or clanging symbol.
Pagan worship. Made offering, banged gong. Impressive noise.
Look at me everybody, and it would also get the god's attention.
If you see using gifts, doing ministry as a way to get attention of people and God—it's just paganism. Even if the Holy Spirit uses it in tremendous ways.

Some not gifted, not articulate. Cast down. I'll never lead Bible study.
I'll never be a church officer. I could never serve in a meaningful way.
You're falling into the same trap. You're basing worth on gifts.
All gifts are limited. A preacher who is good in a small town would never make it in a big steeple church. Only a handful of Billy Grahams.
Gifts are all limited. But grace isn't.
And no matter how limited your gifts are, you have the potential to grow in grace and become a giant in love, in kindness, in patience, in graciousness.
Become a person who astonish people with courage and sweetness.
You have the potential to be a person who changes the world.
What will change the world? Cultivate the love of Jesus in your heart.

If you become famous for being the most loving, gracious person at your work or school or neighborhood or in extended family.
If you're godly and holy you will change lives, even if your gifts and talents are limited. Don't say: I don't have any gifts. That's not important.
Even if you had the miraculous gift of healing.

Even if you could go to the hospital, put hand on someone dying of cancer, and they jump out of bed whole and healthy—do you know what's greater?

Love. Love is greater than miracles. Because it is a miracle of God's grace. Why did Jesus come to earth? What sent him here?

Why did he become a man? Why did he take on human nature and die? And why did God the Father send his only begotten Son to suffer for us and make a place for us in his family?

It wasn't because of Jesus power he came or God the Father's power. It was his love. He loved us in our sin and selfishness.

For the joy set before Christ he endured the cross, scorning its shame. And God has poured out his love into our hearts through his Holy Spirit.

So as we study this chapter in coming weeks—let God's word bring you back to that place where we always need to be—back to his grace. And let that grace do its work in your life, so that you grow in love.