

What is the most important identifying trait God looks for in His people?

June 7, 2009 - 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

The imposing Herodian palace was built about 30 years before Jesus' birth. It towered over the edge of the Judean wilderness. It was built by then King Herod as a possible escape refuge if things got dicey in Jerusalem. It rose more than 45 feet above the hilltop and could be seen 16 km away in Jerusalem. It also overshadowed Bethlehem, only 5 km away. So when Joseph and Mary traveled for the census, the Herodium loomed large over them. While they lived in Bethlehem, they would likely see the palace every day.

The palace itself contained seven stories of apartments, chambers and storage rooms. It had a bath complex that included a hot, warm and cold water baths. Each was decorated with mosaics. Aqueducts brought water in from five kilometers away. You entered it the palace through a three hundred step stairway followed by a two-hundred foot tunnel.

This palace loomed large over everything in that valley. Physically and psychologically, it constantly reminded everyone of Herod's rule. In addition to the palace, Herod's soldiers patrolled the

streets and his tax collectors looked for unpaid taxes. Wherever they turned, Herod's rule towered over their lives. Now we don't have an oppressive ruler and His palace looming over us. But most of us have something or someone that exerts influence over our lives.

What or who towers over our lives? If someone asked you who or what dominated your thinking, decisions and actions, we might reply in different ways. Some of us might say our parents tower over us as we consider their influence on us. Some of us might say our family's well being. We do whatever is best for the family. Others might say a relationship or a health issue or our jobs. Some might say a dream or hope towers over them. One day they hope to realize what they have dreamed about. As Christians, we hopefully see our God as the One person who towers over everything else.

But how do we know if we are on His right track? God identifies one trait; one attribute that must be evident in His true children. God looks for this trait to tower above everything else in our lives. Today, we begin a journey to discover the identity of this trait and what in fact it looks like.

We enter into a new series of messages today that will take us through the summer. The passage describes something that can impact your marriage, relationship, family life and Christian life. It can help us in Jericho Road Living. You may have heard this passage at a wedding. It was read at Princess Diana's funeral 10 years ago by then Prime Minister Tony Blair. It even pops up in pop culture, perhaps because it never mentions God. Yet God inspired the author to write this passage, but why was it included? The Apostle Paul writes to the church he founded in the Greek city of Corinth. The Bible tells us Paul spent 18 months there. The church, composed of Jews and Gentiles, flourished dramatically.

God entrusted the people of the church with many spiritual gifts. In fact people had some of the most dramatic gifts, like healings, miraculous powers, distinguishing between spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues. If you went to the church at Corinth, you would not be bored.

Yet despite the great gifts given to this church, it had serious problems. They divided into camps. They tolerated immorality in their membership. They took each other to court. Some taught that married

couples showed spiritual maturity through celibacy. Some insisted on eating meat offered to idols even if it damaged a weaker brother's faith. They openly challenged Paul's authority as an apostle. And this was the church where gross abuses took place during the Lord's Supper.

Leading up to this famous chapter, Paul tackles another problem in the church. They appeared to argue over spiritual gifts. Some argued that if you had the gift of prophecy, teaching, miracles, healings, tongues or interpretation of tongues, you were more spiritual than people who didn't have those gifts. Apparently, there were some with the gift of tongues who would use their gift in a worship service even if there wasn't an interpreter. Perhaps those who didn't have the gift of tongues responded with great condemnation. We don't know. But we do know there were serious problems between members within the church. In the middle of this discussion comes this chapter. It is here we will discover the number one trait or attitude that God looks for in His people. Today we will look at what happens when God's people ignore this. Then we will consider how we might pray in response to God's revelation in this text.

1 Corinthians 13 NIV

Love

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If 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. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. ¹¹When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. ¹²Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

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

What is the most important identifying characteristic that God looks

for in His people?

Love! **God commands His people to let Godly love tower over everything.** Just like the Herodian towered over Bethlehem, Godly love must tower over our love. I chose the phrase tower over because I

think that's what this chapter points to. To tower over means to govern; rule; to influence every action, decision and to govern our relationships with others.

But why Godly love or God-centered love? Why not just love?

I chose that term because this chapter does not talk about the world's feeling centered love. When we hear the command love one another, we might interpret it to mean "have positive loving feelings for one another. Manufacture the emotion of love to one another." Feelings and emotions hopefully make up part of the love we offer each other. But more important in the Bible is decision love. The Bible describes God as having "steadfast love" for His people. This love continues to love even when one doesn't feel like it. So *Godly love is not feeling love but steadfast love.*

Godly love is not a blind love that ignores betrayal or shows no discernment. But it is a love that is quicker to show grace than condemnation. In our staff devotions this week, Pastor Justin asked the question, "How do we view other Christians outside of our church; other Christian organizations; denominations?" Some Christians especially in the Protestant church are immediately suspicious of other

Christians. After all, we are children of protest; we are Protestants. I'm not saying that it is wrong to separate from a church or denomination that has abandoned the basics of the Gospel. But have we sometimes become too good at separating from one another?

What did Jesus say again in 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 have separated from other Christians not like you. If you have a catchy message on the church sign? If you have children’s ministries? If you have a super efficient church? If you have a knock ‘em flat worship service? If you love one another.’’ All those other things can be important. But towering over it all is love for one another.

I heard another pastor recently say this about his church. He said, “Our problem is not lack of truth; it is lack of love.” God-centered love is not blind undiscerning love. But it is a love that balances that discernment.

This love is *not a human love. It is a love that comes from God*; a love that in some small way approaches the kind of love God showed by sending His Son to die on the cross while we were still

sinner. God commands us to let that kind of God-centered love tower over and govern everything. We’ll explore that this summer.

But in the first three verses of this chapter, Paul grabs the attention of the Corinthian readers by showing what happens when God’s people ignore that call.

What happens when God’s people don’t love?

They produce nothing of value in God’s eyes. (1) Great gifts become useless if they are exercised without love. Great gifts produce nothing of lasting value if they are offered without love.

Verse 1 again. “If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal.” This verse has resulted in a wide debate in Christian circles. Some believe Paul describes the gift of tongues in human languages and the gift of tongues in angelic languages? We do know from Acts 2 that the apostles spoke in tongues of human languages. Visitors to Jerusalem from all over the world could understand the Gospel in their native tongues. Yet in 1 Corinthians 14:2, Paul seems to describe speaking tongues in some sort of non-human language. Others

Christians argue that since Paul begins the verse with the word “if” he is making only a hypothetical situation for his argument.

Whatever he actually meant, the bigger concern is lack of love. “If I speak in tongues, but have not love.” Notice Paul’s sensitivity here. He doesn’t say “if you Corinthians speak in tongues and have not love.” He places himself under this standard.”

So if he exercises this great gift of speaking a message from God in a language you’ve never learned but has not love, what will be the result? Annoying noise. I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal. Now I’m sure Paul meant no offence to gong lovers or cymbal players. But did you notice that there are not many solo albums out there by cymbalists?

Cymbals usually complement what goes on musically in a band or orchestra. But if you just heard a cymbal clanging on its own that wouldn’t really fit. There is no record of gong or brass instruments in Corinthian culture, so this could refer to the bronze amplification systems found in ancient theatres. They didn’t have the speakers like we have today. So they put these hollow echoing bronze structures near the front in an attempt to get the sound up to the back of the

amphitheater. Cymbals however, were known as instruments in those days. They were used in one primary arena; pagan worship services. Pagan priests used cymbals in Corinth to worship the pagan gods Dionysius and Cybele.

So we begin to see the force of Paul’s words here. If Paul or a Christian exercised their great spiritual gift of speaking in tongues without love, they would produce nothing of value in God’s eyes. In fact, it would be more like pagan worship. It would produce something unintelligible. It would take away from worship of God because others would stop and wonder, “What did I hear? What did they say?” So instead of helping their fellow Christian worship the Lord, the person exercising this gift inappropriately distracted from worship of God. That is unloving. Offering a gift without love results in nothing more than irritating noise.

I remember one time when I did something like that. I was newly into ministry in Ottawa. The previous pastor had scheduled a wedding that he could no longer do. So he asked me if I would do it. The couple didn’t come to the church. He was basically the former Pastor’s personal friend.

I reluctantly agreed to do it. It was kind of inconvenient.. I went out to the golf club where they were getting married. I exercised my little speaking gift and officiated over their vows. I made sure the papers were signed. The ceremony ended and I wanted out of there.

You know that sometimes ministers get honorariums for doing weddings. I figured out who might have the envelope and made my way over to the guy. “Well,” I said, “I’m going to have to get going now because I’ve got to prepare for Sunday. Nothing happened. So I guess I’ll be going now.” I probably looked longingly at the inside pocket of his suit jacket. At least I didn’t reach in there and grab it myself.

Then he replied, “so I guess you’ll be wanting the honorarium now.” “Oh, they didn’t have to do that,” I lied. Inside I was thinking, “They better provide something for all this inconvenience they put me through.” He pulled out the envelope, handed it to me and I was gone.

Did I exercise my gift? Yes. Did I do it in love? No. Instead of praying for this couple, considering their circumstances and staying around to get to know them and their family, I treated it solely like a contractual obligation. I am so ashamed I did that. Most of the people

at that wedding were not Christians. I had a tremendous opportunity to hang out with travelers who didn’t even know they needed Christ. Instead I crossed by on the other side of the road so I could get ready for Sunday. I’m sure God was not impressed that day. In fact, I’m quite sure that work of mine produced a cheque for me but nothing of value in God’s eyes. When God’s people neglect love we produce nothing but noise.

What else happens when God’s people don’t love?

Verse 2 tells us

They are nothing. (2)

Paul moves on from tongues to other gifts in verse 2. Yet here, he deliberately exaggerates to emphasize his point. “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge, If I have ALL faith that could move mountains;” but have not love, I am nothing. No human can fathom every mystery and contain all knowledge. No human has all the faith that is possible in the world. Perhaps there were some in the Corinthian church that bragged about their prophecy. Or there were some who were prideful with their intellect. “Ask me any Trivial Pursuit question and I’ll nail it.” Or

perhaps there were some who did have the gift of extraordinary faith. They constantly pushed their fellow believers to trust God for more.

Maybe Paul goes beyond what he heard from some Corinthian believers. “So you people who have the gifts of prophecy, discernment and faith, imagine if I had it all. I had supersized prophecy, I had full calorie discernment and I had mountain moving faith. You can just see the people with those gifts salivating at the prospect.

Then Paul drops the bombshell, “but have not love, I am nothing.” This time its not just making irritating noise. Absence of love leads Paul to declare this seemingly harsh statement – “I am nothing.” What could that mean? Some commentators argue it means basically the same thing as in verse 1. “My works amount to nothing.” That could be part of it. But somehow works without love impact the identity of the person. Some commentators say the person lacks dignity or value. I can’t see that either because every person has value and dignity simply because they bear the image of God.

But another more likely possibility is the person who acts without love is a “nothing.” In other words, a nothing is a person of

no consequence or significance when it comes to the things of God. So those who exercised these gifts without love would not be remembered as great prophets, discerners or faithful. They would be forgotten – a nothing. Perhaps that is what Paul was trying to get across here in using this terminology. It’s like the people with these gifts were playing a computer game where they are a King or Emperor out to rule the world. They do really well in the game in fact they’re about to conquer the world in one more turn. But then, their computer freezes, they haven’t saved their game. So instead of a conquering emperor, they end up being nothing but another player starting from scratch! Without love, the person gifted for ministry can suddenly become nothing.

When God’s people ignore love, they become irritating noise and nothing of significance in the eyes of heaven. Lastly, **They gain nothing. (3)** Great acts of service without love bring no gain to the giver.

Verse 3 again – “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.” Paul first speaks of a great act of kindness. Someone with wealth sells it off

piece by piece and gives the proceeds to the poor. This is exactly what Jesus instructed the rich young ruler to do. It is a once for all action of a man who in one grand sweeping gesture, sells all he has and gives it away. Yet Paul raises the possibility that one can do all that without love.

The second example, “giving my body up for flames”, is much debated. In fact, if you are following along in your Bible, it probably has a footnote to verse 3. You will see the alternate reading is “if I give my body that I may boast.” Most translations follow the “surrendering body to the flames” version. If that is what Paul wrote, then he describes a willing submission to some sort of martyrdom by fire. Yet even that could be done without love.

There are some problems with that conclusion. At the time of writing, Martyrdom by fire was not yet happening to Christians. Nero’s fires were about 10 years away. It could be the frequency of martyrdom in the church after Paul, and the fact many Christians have been burned at the stake over the years led translators to choose this option.

But what about the alternative, “If I surrender my body that I may boast.” How would that be a good thing? We must remember that for Paul, boasting in the right things was a valid activity. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, Paul lists all kinds of sufferings that he could boast about. But instead he chooses to boast about what the Lord has done through His weakness. Boasting about the Lord could be what he meant here.

Yet again, if that was done without love, Paul says “I gain nothing.” Here again is another example of Scripture correcting me. Because we have to get a title out on the sign, a week in advance of the message, I quickly look at passages and communicate what I think they say. This week’s sign message was “Works without love are worthless.” Now according to the first two examples, that’s probably true. Tongues offered without love is just noise. Knowledge offered without love leads to no significance in the eyes of heaven.

But here Paul says “I gain nothing.” Certainly the poor would gain something if a wealthy person sold his possessions and gave it to the poor. So in one sense, that work would not be worthless to them. But the wealthy person would gain nothing. Paul may reflect his own

Jewish background here in which good deeds “profit” one before God. Perhaps the belief was that if you did these good deeds, it obligated God to give you some big checkmarks on your account. Wow, did you see what he did. Well done, good and faithful servant. But Paul says, doing them without love cancels any gain.

So Paul presents each one of these conditional sentences to sober the Corinthians. “Let’s get away from the importance of spiritual gifts friends. Let’s get away from differences of opinion about how things should be done. If we lack love, it amounts to nothing in God’s eyes. Without love we miss the most important attribute for any Christian. One commentator summarizes this passage like this: “What is involved here are 2 opposing views of what it means to be spiritual. For the Corinthians it meant “tongues, wisdom, knowledge” (and pride), but without concern for truly Christian behavior. For Paul it meant first of all to be full of the Holy Spirit, which therefore meant to behave as those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be his holy people (1:2) of which the ultimate expression always is to “walk in love.” As the passage continues, he lays out those most famous verses of what this kind of love looks like.

But today, we must step back from the specifics of verses 1-3 to the big picture. God commands His people to let Godly love tower over everything. We’ve seen what happens when God’s people forget about love.

How might we respond today?

Some of us need to respond by remember that His Godly love towers over us. God, who calls us to let love govern everything, loves us. Remember God’s love for you. His love for us governs everything in our relationship with Him.

Some need to receive His love for the first time! If you are not a Christian here today, God offers you the same love that He has given to every Christian here. To offer that love, however, came at great personal cost to Him and to His Son. We are sinners by nature. God is holy by nature. His character prevents Him from being close to unholiness in any way – trivialize sin. God is so holy, that even the angels around his throne cover their faces.

Sinners who do not come to God, will ultimately face His just wrath. But because of His great love, He sent His Son. Jesus came and lived a perfect life full of Godly love. Then He went to the cross.

On the cross, God poured out the wrath we deserved onto Jesus. Then Jesus died. He was raised again on the third day.

Now He reigns from the right hand of God. Anyone who puts their personal trust in Him as Savior from God's wrath will become God's child. Could today be the day you follow through? Will you place your trust in Christ today for the very first time? If you do, God will pour His love and Gospel into your life. He will immediately adopt you as His child. He will justify you or change your status before Him from a child of wrath to a child of grace. You will begin the journey with Him of receiving His love and offering it to others. If you don't know Christ please put your trust in Him right now or in a few moments when we pray.

All Christians, by His power and strength, can offer this kind of love to others.

Consider the people around you in this room right now. Who are they? Mutual bench warmers? a crowd that you happen to be part of once in awhile or your beloved brothers and sisters in Christ? What about the people around us as we consider living on the Jericho Road? What if we don't like them? What if we're uncomfortable around

them? How on earth are we going to love them like this? It is then we must admit our brokenness and sinfulness. We remember we are saved and being saved by God's grace. So we turn to Christ in our brokenness and receive from Him the love needed to give to others. Then that Godly love will tower over everything. We'll know we're in step with where God wants us to be.

The palace of Herodians towered over everything the citizens of Bethlehem did. That was an oppressive rule. God calls us to let Godly love tower over our lives. That is heaven's rule the God ordained way the world will know we are Christ's disciples.

Prayer: Remind us of God's love towering over you

Receive God's love for the first time

Receive God's love to pass on to that person you're finding difficult to love.