

*Almost everyone knows the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, the “Love Chapter” of the Bible. Who hasn’t heard that famous last verse? *“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”*

But very few people know the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians—the chapter immediately preceding. That is unfortunate, because the two chapters go hand in hand. In the twelfth chapter, Paul presents *a problem*. In the thirteenth chapter, he presents *the answer*. The problem that he addressed in the twelfth chapter is spiritual pride—the kind of pride that divides Christian from Christian—the kind of pride that says, “I am more important than you are.”

The problem in the little church at Corinth had to do with spiritual gifts. Some people said, “I am a prophet; therefore, I am better than you.” Others said, “I am a teacher; therefore, I am better than you.” Still others said, “I speak in tongues; therefore, I am better than you.”

The problem still exists in churches today. Many churches still practice speaking in tongues—which is perfectly all right. What’s not all right is saying, “I am better than you are.” If anyone ever tells you that you *must* speak in tongues, point them to the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of First Corinthians. In the twelfth chapter, Paul lists a series of gifts, and he does so in descending order. The first gift mentioned, being an *apostle* (one who is sent) is the most important. The last gift mentioned, speaking in tongues, is the least important.

Then Paul goes on to talk about what is really important. He says, *“Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way”* (12:31). That introduces the first verse of chapter 13, the “Love Chapter,” which says: *“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* (13:1). Paul isn’t telling us that faith is unimportant. He isn’t saying that feeding the hungry is not important. He isn’t suggesting that the person who suffers persecution for his or her faith isn’t doing something very important. They are all important. But he is telling us that nothing we do is important at all if we do not do it in love. Love becomes the validation of our Christian life and experience.

You can be a Christian without speaking in tongues. You can be a Christian without the gift of prophecy. You can be a Christian without the gift of teaching. But you cannot be a Christian without the gift of love. In fact, the apostle John says virtually the same thing. He says: *“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love”* (1 John 4:7-8). That does not mean everyone who loves is a Christian. Far from it. There are millions of mothers who love their children very much but are not Christian. There are millions of kind and generous people who would probably reject being called a Christian. Not every person who loves is a Christian, but every authentic Christian person is called to love others.

There is a Latin phrase that describes what I'm talking about. The phrase is *sine qua non*, which means "that without which—nothing." In other words, if you don't have this, you don't have anything. For Christians, love is the *sine qua non*, that without which—nothing. Paul suggests that if we do not have love, *we are nothing*. And then Paul goes on to describe what love looks like. He does so, because there is a huge difference between the world's idea of love and God's idea of love. When the world says, "I love you," it means, "I want what you have—your money—your body—your status." Christ's love is different. Paul says: "*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails*" (13:4-8).

I want to ask you to think of yourself as you listen to these words. Hear these words and see if they are true for you. See if they accurately describe you. Can you say of yourself: "I am patient; I am kind; I am not envious or boastful or proud. I am not self-seeking. I am not easily angered; I keep no record of wrongs. I do not delight in evil but rejoice with the truth. I always protect; I always trust; I always hope; I always persevere."

If you think that describes you, cross-check it. Ask your husband or wife, or your parents or children. Say to them, "Check me out on this. Have I got all of this right?" Then say to them what I just said. If you pass that test, I would like you serve on the church's board of Deacons or become our next Elder on the Session. If we don't have a position open right now, we'll create one just for you. In fact, I'll probably want you to take my place!

The sad fact is that I, Karl, am sometimes not patient and not kind. I sometimes insist on my own way. I am sometimes keep a record of wrongs. But I'm not proud of that. Those are things I need to work on, because they damage my Christian walk. They are like poison to my soul. I need to get rid of them.

I guess all of us will be leaving here today with something to work on. Paul tells us that, "if we ain't got love, we ain't got nuthin." Then, when he tells us what love looks like—when he tells us that love is not a feeling or an emotion, or certainly not lust—we see how far off the mark we really are.

- We need to pray for God's help to become loving persons.
- We need to pray for God's help to be patient persons.
- We need to pray for God's help to be kind persons.
- We need to pray for God's help to not be envious.
- We need to pray for God's help to not be self-seeking.
- We need to pray for God's help to be more loving, because without love, nothing else matters.

We need not only love one another. We need to love God. This is serious business. Many of us have broken God's heart with our lack of love. Richard Foster, a very fine Christian writer, puts it this way:

"Today the heart of God is an open wound of love.

He aches over our distance and preoccupation.

He mourns that we do not draw near to him.

He grieves that we have forgotten him.

He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness.

*He longs for our presence....
And he is inviting you, and me, to come home,
to come home to where we belong....
His arms are stretched out wide to receive us.
His heart is enlarged to take us in,
for too long we have been in a far country;
a country of noise and hurry and crowds,
a country of climb and push and shove,
a country of frustration and fear and intimidation.
And He welcomes us home... ”*

Isn't that what we really need—to come home? Indeed, without love, the whole world is a far country. Without love, we live in a far country of noise and hurry and crowds. Without love, we live in a far country of climbing and pushing and shoving. Without love, we live in a far country of frustration and fear and intimidation.

Most of us wish that somebody else would change so that we would not live in this far country. Understand that God isn't offering to change our husband or our wife, our neighbor, or our co-worker, or our boss. **He is offering to change us. He is calling us to become loving persons.** When that happens, we will find ourselves arriving at home from that far country. We will find the Heavenly Father waiting with open arms to receive us.

So today I give you the greatest challenge I will ever issue from this pulpit. I challenge you to become patient and kind. I challenge you to not be envious or boastful or proud. I challenge you to not dishonor others, to not be self-seeking, to not be easily angered, to keep no record of wrongs. **I challenge you to love.**

Then we will see more clearly the loving face of God.

Dear friends, we who are called by God, are called to love. Amen.

*Some of this sermon is taken verbatim from a sermon by Richard Niell Donovan (Copyright 2006).