

Why Love Matters Most!

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts.

And now I will show you the most excellent way. 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. 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. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, 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. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When 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. Now 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.

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

During my high school years I worked in a grocery store. One of the duties we had when it came close to closing time was to clean up the shelves. You had to go up and down every aisle pulling cans and boxes forward. For some reason we called it a "ted job," but today they call it facing. The idea is you pull all of the goods forward so when you looked down the aisle, it looked tidy and clean and as if all the shelves were fully stocked. Of course we would restock the shelves when we had the time, but for the time being we made the shelves look full.

Last week we had our Annual Meeting. Along with that we published our Annual Report. Have you read yours yet? This is a good report to publish. It shows how much we actually do. I like to hand out a copy to anyone interested in our congregation or a new member so they can see that we do a lot here.

There are churches that do more than us, and some that do less, but I think we do a lot here. But here is the question: Is that what we want to be known for, all that we do? I mean, when the aisle at the grocery store has been faced it looks so neat and tidy. Is our Annual Report a good face job, giving the impression we are a good, solid Christian congregation by all we do? Or should there be more?

We will return to our epistle reading from earlier and from it we learn two things. Yes, a Christian congregation is very active and busy. But any activity it has is only a good face job hiding empty shelves if it isn't backed by love.

I. A Christian congregation is a busy, active church.

A Christian congregation is an active congregation. That's how God designed it. "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts."

God's congregations are full of gifted people who do a lot of things. But they were not gifted before God made them a part of his Church. God didn't say, "Oh, he is good. He can do so much for the Church so I will save him. That guy over there? Forget it. He has few skills." If God did that, then Jesus died on the cross for nothing. Then it will no longer be by grace we are saved, but by works. God doesn't work that way. Instead he saves and calls us to saving faith in Christ and then he gives us the skills we need to work in his church.

Every Christian has been given one or more gifts from God, abilities they can use in his church. And not everyone is the same. A Dairy Queen with ten managers and no employees will fail. There is no one to make the floats or Blizzards or to fry the fries. The same with the church. God describes it as a human body. The human body has so many different parts and each has a function. I knew a gentleman who lost his two big toes in the Korean War from frostbite. We joked he would be in trouble if he was every pulled over by the police because he would fail the sobriety test every time. Big toes don't seem all that important, but you can't walk a straight line without them. So big toes are important.

So each member of a congregation is a part of the body. Each is different. Each is important. Our annual report lists the names of so many people doing so many different things. I know more is being done by members that isn't listed in this report. But what a privilege we have. God didn't just save you; he gives you something to do and a purpose until you get home to heaven.

There is a warning here. The Corinthian congregation to whom Paul wrote this letter was one of the most gifted and active churches Paul had seen. Their Annual Report would be very thick. But they had a problem. Sure, the shelves looked full, but Paul looked behind the face job and saw empty shelves; he saw jealousy, discontent, and unhappiness. So Paul points them to one more gift from God, one that gives purpose and meaning to everything we do.

II. A Christian Congregation is a loving congregation.

“And now I will show you the most excellent way. 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. 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. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

We often have the attitude that as long as the job gets done, that is all that matters. So, we are happy if a kid cleaned up his room even if it took yelling and threats from us, right? God says no. He has a stinging indictment in our text. He says that anything we do is nothing if it isn't done out of love. Look at Cain and Abel in Genesis. Both made sacrifices to God every week. Cain, a farmer, offered vegetables. Abel, a rancher, offered animals from his flocks and herds. Yet, God made it clear that he loved Abel's sacrifices but despised Cain's. Why? Is it because God enjoys T-bone steaks more than spinach? No. It is because Abel offered his sacrifices out of love and faith to God, and Cain didn't.

If I can proclaim God's Word with the greatest eloquence, but have not love, it is nothing. If you or I have a faith that can shove the Rocky Mountains into the Pacific Ocean, but have not love, we are nothing. If we take everything we have and give it to the poor, but have not love, we gain nothing. We could be the most dynamic, busy church who does so many things, but have not love, we are like annoying noise.

Yes, God gives us so many gifts and abilities. But he also gives a reason why we do these things. Like how every waterfall begins with a trickle from some small mountain stream, God has a love that comes to us and produces a waterfall in our lives. There is the story of a young boy who went to the pet store to see a new litter of pups. He held each one in his arms and told the owner he will be back to buy one. For the next two weeks that boy mowed lawns and washed windows to earn enough to buy a puppy. He goes back to the pet store and picks out the puppy he wanted. It was the smallest, skinniest, runt of the litter. It even had a lame leg. The storeowner did all he could to convince the boy not to buy that one. “He's lame. He won't be able to run or play fetch with you.” But the boy insisted and bought that puppy. The owner was about to try one last time to trade him a healthy puppy, but swallowed his words when he saw the boy walk out of the store and sunlight glistened off a metal brace on the boy's trousers. The boy was lame, too.

We are so conditioned to think that only the best of the litter deserves to be rewarded. But not according to God's love. In fact, before God no one is worthy of God's love and attention. Yet, even when we do not deserve it, God loves us and forgives our sin. He sent Jesus to be our Savior. He died for us so that we do not perish, but have everlasting life. We don't see people as better or worse than ourselves. We see them as fellow sinners crippled with sin, but saved by Christ.

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” What an unusual statement. Faith is essential for whoever believes will not perish but have everlasting life. Hope is that longing for heaven which sustains us even in the face of death. Yet, how can love be greater? Well, I can share my faith. I can confess it, but you can't see it. But love from faith shows you my faith. If I loved the world and all it offers, I wouldn't want heaven. Then I would have no hope. But love from God and to God shows the hope I have to be not only with him, but like him, loving as he loved us. That is how love is the greatest. All three are great. All three are needed. But love shows a living and active faith and a hope for salvation.

Our annual report shows that we are an active church. But it also shows us why. It is no coincidence that first page is our mission statement and purpose for existing. We exist because God so loved us along with the world that he gave up Christ for us. This is our reason to exist, this is the reason we are active. Without Christ any activity will be simply a face job hiding empty shelves. Because of Christ our shelves are full and our activities are full of his love for us and our love for him. Amen.