

LOVE'S IMPORTANCE

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Sermon for Peace Church

Oct. 5, 2008

PURPOSE - To call forth a life of adventure and courage in love, given its eternal importance.

MAIN IDEA – Because only love counts, we give our life to its cause, seeking to grow in it, drawing from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. At the end of a day, at the end of a life ... how do you measure success?

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.

(i) I've been working with a thought lately – the impending ECONOMIC RECESSION might not be a bad thing for God's people. In fact, it might even be a good thing for the cause of the kingdom & church – cause it might bring us more toward that which the Bible states is the only thing that COUNTS (Gal. 5:6) – *“faith expressing itself in love.”*

- A. Perhaps some of you saw the movie, “The Aviator”. It reintroduced us to the life of Howard Hughes. Last century, he was the richest man on earth (recession-safe) – yet his last years were spent in a private world of paranoia – afraid of contamination from the outside world. He was brilliant (designed aircraft), creative (movie maker), unbelievably wealthy, but he became a crazed hermit with yellow skin, bloodshot eyes, overgrown nails. Purportedly he died, of all things, of malnutrition – isolated in a hotel penthouse.

At the end of a day, at the end of a life, how do you measure success? ... Economically? Materially? ... by standards of intelligence? Creativity?

II. VERSES 1-3

The church to whom Paul wrote this famous chapter was a group of people who tended to measure success by ABILITY, KNOWLEDGE & POWER.

1. So Paul begins this chapter by writing about ELOQUENCE.

“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.”

(i) As someone responsible to speak publicly on a regular basis, I am mesmerized by those gifted with eloquence.

Obama’s cadence, tone, rhythm, his soaring lyric – coming out of the African-American preaching tradition.

Palin too is a gifted speaker – candid, folksy – “High connectivity”

A. The ability to communicate is a great gift. In the Corinthian church there were people capable of speaking in the tongues of men ... AND ANGELS = heavenly languages!

But abilities mean nothing if they’re not submitted to the cause of love.

(ii) *“If I speak in the tongues of men & angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”*

= a noisy racket!

A. The line reminds me of the Gong Show – You remember that? Did any of you watch that on TV? (datin’ myself) ... Amateur performers would come on stage before a panel of celebrity judges. They’d do their act and get a rating out of 10. But ... if there was a particularly bad performance, one of those panelists would pick up this large mallet and slowly walk over and hit this big Chinese gong ... to eliminate the contestant.

At the end of an act, at the end of a life ... all abilities – verbal, athletic, musical, mechanical intellectual - all abilities NOT SUBMITTED to the cause of love amount to the CLANGING of a GONG ... and ELIMINATION from the stage.

2. KNOWLEDGE TOO is nothing without love:

(i) *If I have the gift of prophecy* = can see into the future – some of us have that. We can discern trends and anticipate changes, have a feel for new values on the horizon ... FUTURISTS they're now called.

- But what do you do with that insight? Without bringing it to the cause of love ... IT MEANS NOTHING.

(ii) *If I can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge* – Understanding is a great thing – we all benefit from it – scientific, medical, engineering, astronomical research.

Knowledge is growing exponentially. It used to double every 100 years, then 50, then 20, 7, now 5, soon 3 ... mysteries are being fathomed.

- As you grow in your own understanding – through books read, courses completed, degrees attained ... what do you do with that knowledge?

A. Without love it means nothing!!

In fact, it's harmful. Earlier in this same letter – ch. 8:1 – Paul wrote, *“Knowledge PUFFS UP, but love BUILDS UP”*

Knowledge without love leads to ARROGANCE.

3. *If I have a faith that can MOVE MOUNTAINS, but have not love I am nothing!*

Here Paul refers to POWER.

(i) In any society, in any organization, there are those with more power and those with less power.

- Power is the ability to influence others. Power is the ability to move mountains.

A. Sometimes it comes from a POSITION you have – “the head / boss”; sometimes it comes from your FINANCIAL MEANS – money is power in any organization; sometimes it comes from experience ... but mostly, power comes from TRUST – that's the deepest and most legitimate power.

In the church, those with the most power are those most trusted / respected. You've earned that. It's legit! You have a trust, a faith that can move mountains (= move people).

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH IT?

Without submission to the ADVANCE of love, your power means nothing.

4. And the last line of this opening paragraph is the MOST SEARCHING:

“If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

These are tremendous DEEDS! – giving up one’s possessions, one’s life

(i) But Paul makes clear: They can be done without love.

So love is a MOTIVE as well as a cause.

A. Deeds done for the applause of others ... or SELF-affirmation ... are not love.

WHAT THEN IS LOVE? AND WHAT is LOVE’S MOTIVE?

- Let’s answer those 2 questions in the rest of this message, letting a voice from the past answer the first one.

III. WHAT IS LOVE

MLK VIDEO

1. What is love?

The love our chapter calls us to, as Dr. King breaks it down, is “understanding, creative, redemptive good will to all men.”

- Unless we have that love – AGAPE love – we are nothing ... we have nothing ... we gain nothing.

(i) I wanted that voice heard on this All Nations Heritage Sunday to remind us that this love is first not about feeling. Agape love has more to do with choice / commitment / DECISION & behavior.

FRIENDSHIP – liking others – “phileo love” – connects with our feelings – it’s beautiful, it’s good - but even the ungodly love their friends.

ROMANCE – “eros” love – even more connects to feelings.

AGAPE LOVE is the decision to bring good will – REDEMPTIVE good will – to others.

- So agape love can even love our ENEMIES!

2. I wanted that voice from the past heard to remind us also that this call to love is not a SAPPY THING.

- Love is challenge, risk, adventure
- Love costs – It was for the sake of love that that voice ended through murder.
- To love is to be alive

(i) The biggest problem we face in our suburb life is that WE'RE BORED.

We're BUSY, but we're BORED. We're not stretched. We're not challenged. We don't need to pray and grow. So we live lives of "quiet desperation".

To give ourselves to the advance of love brings MEANING to life.

EVERY DAY MATTERS WHEN LOVE MATTERS.

3. To give ourselves to the advance of love means learning HOW TO LOVE.

- You get better at love the more you understand LOVE'S WAYS (that's the focus of our upcoming servoces).

- You get better at love the more you understand those you're CALLED TO LOVE.

I.e. – In our context we want to know the STORY & VALUES of the ethnicities we're called to love. LOVE LEARNS.

4. To give yourself to the advance of love means moving TOWARD PEOPLE.

= NOT EASY or NATURAL – when keeping control is a spiritual stronghold of your subculture, you prefer life more measured and predictable – even if it is boring.

= NOT EASY or NATURAL – when you live in a broader culture that values the acquisition of resources that isolate you from others.

= NOT EASY or NATURAL – as King reminds us – when people are difficult to love.

Thomas a Kempis – *"To love at all is to risk and become vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping your heart intact and safe, give it to no one. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries (trips here & there, new furniture); avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the coffin of your self. But in that coffin – safe, dark, motionless, airless – your heart will change. It won't be broken, it'll become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside heaven when you can be perfectly safe from all the danger of love ... is HELL."*

IV. CONCLUSION

If this is love, WHERE DO WE GET THE RESOURCES to face the dangers, pursue the adventures and LEARN TO LOVE?

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who gives their life to the cause of love has been born of God and knows God ... This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. In this is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins ... We love because he first loved us. – I John 4

1. That's the answer to our 2nd question – LOVE'S RESOURCE & MOTIVE is here (table):
While we were yet enemies of God, He AGAPE-LOVED us.

- (i) Just as King had enemies, but chose to love them – even at the expense of his life – so did God. You & I are that enemy.

By nature, we're more CALLOUS TO GOD than a southern white bigot to the Negro in the 1960's ... more offensive, more destructive.

- That's what sin is – and there are occasions from human history that help us to see that – lest we think that sin is this cute, innocuous, pooh-pooh thing!

Yet God offers you ... understanding, creative, redemptive good will in his Son Jesus Christ.

- The ongoing effects of sin harden your heart, locking it up in the safety of the coffin of self. Every day we make decisions whether to grow or shrink in love.

So today God offers you “understanding, creative, redemptive good will in his Son Jesus Christ”.

In this is love – not that we love God, but that He loved us and gave His Son as an atoning sacrifice for sins ... WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

2. For communion this morning, we're going to form circles – 2 up front, 1 in the back – and serve the bread & cup to one another saying, “the body & blood of our Lord Jesus Christ”.

- It's a way to express a commitment to love one another, and together to love this world.

Those circles of love begin at this table, as the elders bring you the love of God in Jesus Christ, to be received in faith.

But for that to be meaningful, we must come with a REPENTANT HEART to this meal.

- We need to confess how readily we shrink in love ... how safe we play it.
- We need to confess how often we don't know how to best love those different from us – and don't care.
- We need to confess our weakness & failures in love.

EAT THIS MEAL ONLY IF YOU'RE HUNGRY!

3. THUS NOURISHED, our MOTIVES in love are purified.

WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

As King put it, "AGAPE is the love of God operating in the human heart ... a love of others not because we like or dislike them ... but "a love of every man because God loves them"

= a love of every man because God even loves me!

Without THAT love ... I am nothing ... I have nothing ... I gain nothing.

But IN THAT love, I'm ALIVE!

We love because He first loved us.

AMEN