

The LOVE Test

“A More Excellent Way”

Part 1

Scripture Reading

“And I will show you a still more excellent way.” (1 Corinthians 12:31)

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

Prayer of Blessing

Introduction

When I was in Jr. High and Sr. High school, it was not uncommon for “love” notes to be secretly passed during class. In fact, a simple note passed in an English class changed my life forever.

It was 11th grade English, and as fate would have it, a new girl in town named Cathy Stevens was seated directly in front of me. She was beautiful. There was something special about Cathy. She had a radiant smile and an infectious personality. There was a magnetic glow about Cathy that I’d never seen in another girl. There was just one problem - Cathy was dating someone else. I determined that Cathy needed to be rescued and I was the guy to do it.

So, in a bold and courageous act, I took a piece of notebook paper and scribbled a note that said – **“Will you go to the prom with me?”** When the teacher wasn’t looking, I stealthily dropped the note over Cathy’s shoulder and the rest, as they say, was history.

A simple, but very intentional note radically changed my life forever.

For the next seven weeks, Jesus wants to pass each of us a note. Written in His note is a very simple and intentional question – **“Do you love people the way I love you?”**

A Call to Love

How you and I choose to answer Jesus’ question will radically impact our lives and the Church – either for the good or for the bad.

More specifically, how we answer this most important question will determine whether or not our lives are a sweet melody of music that is pleasing to the ear or a noisy gong that is annoying and distracting. Our answer will determine whether our lives bear fruit for the

glory of God or produce nothing of eternal value. Our answer will determine whether the Church reaps a harvest that adds to the Kingdom of God or exists with irrelevancy within her community.

Love Is Related To...?

From a Christian perspective, have you ever pondered what God relates love to? If you haven't, let me help you out. In the Bible...

God relates love to our single greatest purpose in life. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus said in Matthew 22:36-38...

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment."

Our greatest purpose in life – the reason God created us and redeemed us – is to love Him with everything we've got. Everything! We're not to hold anything back. The heart and soul and mind represent the entirety of who we are as human beings.

God relates love to the second greatest purpose in life as well. Just one verse later in Matthew 22:39, Jesus says...

"And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

So, according to our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, the two greatest purposes in life are to love God with everything we've got and to love people to the degree in which we love ourselves. And, let's be honest with each other – we all have a deep love for ourselves, don't we? Can you imagine what our community would like if we started loving people the way we love ourselves? Can you imagine what the Church would look like if we started loving each other to the degree in which we love ourselves?

This is just the beginning of what God relates love to.

In arguably the most popular verse in the entire Bible, **God relates love to the giving of His Son Jesus to the world.**

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

It was God's great love for you that caused Him to send His Son Jesus to suffer and die for your sins. Jesus wasn't sent out of obligation. Jesus wasn't sent reluctantly. Jesus wasn't sent out of selfish gain. Jesus was sent to this earth as a result of God's great love for you and me.

In the Gospel of John, **Jesus relates love to the world's ability to identify His genuine followers/disciples.**

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

Our spiritual identity as redeemed followers of Jesus Christ hinges on our commitment to love each other the way Jesus loved us. Our failure to love with Christlike love will leave us indistinguishable from our lost world and will mute the Gospel in our community. We are not identified as Christians by the Church we attend, the denomination we defend, the spiritual gifts we display, the theology we espouse, or the proclamation we trumpet. No! Jesus reminds us that the lost world will know that we belong to Him by the way we love each other, as well as others.

So...love is directly related to the character of God, the heart of God, the overarching purpose of the Christian life, and the world's ability to see and experience the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

If that's not enough to get our attention, there are specific commands related to love that God expects each of us to live out daily. God has commanded us to "pursue love" (1 Cor. 14:1), to "put on love" (Col. 3:14), to "increase and abound in love" (1 Thess. 3:12), to be "unified in love" (Phil. 2:2), to be "fervent in love" (1 Peter 4:8), and "stir up one another to love" (Heb. 10:24).

Thus, if our greatest purpose is to love God with everything we've got and to love people like Christ loved us; if our identity as Christ followers is revealed through love; if we're commanded by God to pursue love, increase in love, be unified in love, and stir up one another in love, then it's critically important that we ask a key question - **"What is God's definition of love?"**

God's Definition of "LOVE"

The clearest and most beautiful definition of love is found in 1 Corinthians 13. First Corinthians 13 has been called "a breath of fresh air, an oasis in a desert,"¹ as well as "the greatest, strongest, deepest thing Paul ever wrote."² Nowhere in the Bible is there a more thought provoking definition of what Christian love is and is not.

This is where we find our test. This is Jesus' "love note" to you and me.

If we have any hope of fulfilling our greatest purpose in life; any desire of being recognized as genuine followers of Jesus; any passion for love to increase; any intention of stirring each other up in love; any hope of being unified in the bond of love, then we must take **"The LOVE Test"** found in 1 Corinthians 13.

¹ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, p. 328.

² Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, p. 174. Quote attributed to German theologian Adolph Harnack.

As we take God's love test, we must lay our lives open before Jesus and allow Him to test our hearts for genuine Christian love. Where love is lacking, we must confess with brokenness and trust in God's grace to fill us with the love of Christ. Where the love of Christ is present, we must steward it with diligence and care and distribute it lavishly and generously for the glory of God.

In 1 Corinthians 13, the word "love" appears ten times. In the Greek, there are three primary root words used to describe love – *agape*, *phileo*, and *eros*.

Agape love is best defined by "God's love" – a love that is unconditional, selfless, sacrificial, and desirous of putting the welfare of others above our own. *Agape* is supernatural and spiritual.

Phileo love is best defined as "brotherly love" – a love that finds its root in genuine friendship. *Phileo* is primarily emotional.

Eros love is best defined as "sexual love" – a love that is based on physical attraction and romance. *Eros* is where we get the English word erotic and is thus primarily sexual.

Can you guess which of these three words God uses to define love? Each reference to love found in 1 Corinthians is *agape*. There is no mention of *phileo* or *eros*. God is not talking about friendship love. Nor does He have erotic and sexual love in mind. On the contrary, God is describing a supernatural, spiritual love that is rightly ours through Christ Jesus the Lord.

Paul begins his discourse on love by saying,

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

The Church in Corinth had a love problem. In fact, the Church in Corinth was very similar to the Church in Ephesus found in Revelation 2:1-7. The Christians in Corinth had abandoned love. Corinth possessed all the spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit and these Christians had put them on full display for everyone to see. However, the Church in Corinth had a deadly cancer growing within. The Corinthians were more interested in publicly displaying their preferred gifts (namely the gift of tongues), than they were in extending the love of Christ.

Thus, right in the middle of bringing much needed clarity to the Corinthians use of spiritual gifts – particularly the gift of tongues - Paul launches into his great love chapter. In fact, at the end of 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says that he's going to show the Corinthians "a more excellent way."

The way is LOVE!

“A Noisy Gong”

In the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul’s intention is to address those spiritual gifts that the Corinthians had overemphasized at the expense of love – the gift of tongues, the gift of prophesy and teaching, the gift of knowledge, and the gift of miracles, and the gift of giving. The Corinthians were consumed with the public exercise of these gifts. For these Christians, love had become an afterthought. Love had become expendable. Love had become a down graded stock.

Paul begins his definition of love by bringing the gift of tongues to the forefront of his discourse. As already noted, the Corinthians placed a premium on the gift of speaking in tongues. To say that the “tongues” was the preferred gift in Corinth would be an understatement. Thus, speaking hypothetically, Paul writes in verse one,

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.”

By mentioning the “tongues of men and of angels,” Paul offers an all-inclusive summary of this ecstatic, supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit. By lumping the two together, Paul acknowledges the gift of languages (glossae) that were dispersed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as well as the gift of heavenly language. Although, without question, angelic tongues are presented in human language throughout the Bible, Paul seems to imply that angels have a unique heavenly language.

Paul’s hypothetical argument to the Corinthians is clear. Without *agape*, possessing the supernatural gift of tongues, whether human languages or angelic utterances, is nothing but meaningless, distracting, and annoying noise. Without Christlike love, the gift of tongues has no melody, no rhyme, and brings no pleasure to the listener. Rather, it becomes a random echo of loud noise that aggravates and confuses the listener. Thus, according to God, the Corinthians could possess the spiritual gift of tongues (the gift they craved the most) without it having any edifying, understandable, or pleasing effect on listeners. The gift of tongues exercised without *agape* love is a wasted gift.

Even though you may be blessed with gift of tongues through the Holy Spirit – maybe even angelic tongues – God’s gift to you brings no pleasure to Him or others when it is not accompanied by *agape* love. **Are you a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal?**

“I Am Nothing”

In verse two, Paul writes...

“If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

Whereas in verse one Paul mentions the single gift of tongues, in verse two he mentions three specific gifts – (1) the gift of prophetic teaching, (2) the gift of supernatural and intellectual knowledge, and (3) the gift of miraculous faith, which should not to be confused with “saving” faith.

Each of these spiritual gifts are public gifts – gifts that tempt every Christian to define his or her worth and significance in the display of the gift rather than the Giver of the gift. Whether you're a gifted teacher or preacher, a person who understands the deepest mysteries of God, a person of superior intellectual facilities, or a person whose spiritual gift of faith has the power to perform miracles, without agape love these gifts bring no value or worth to your life.

In fact, Paul offers a more provocative result. Without Christlike love as the power behind these public gifts, we are nothing. Without agape love, preaching God's Word, discerning and prophesying the deep mysteries of God, ascending to the highest peak of biblical and theological knowledge, and possessing a faith that can supernaturally perform miracles has no eternal value. These gifts are viewed as nothingness in the eyes of God.

Are you a gifted teacher whose proclamation is void of Christlike love? Are you able to discern the deep mysteries of God, but lack an unconditional love for people? Do you possess a superior intellect, but possess no passion to put others before yourself? Have you been blessed with a faith that has the power to accomplish miracles, but lack a desire to extend the love of Christ to others? If so, God says that you become "nothing?" These gifts, however admirable and no matter how great the applause, have no value when they are not accompanied by *agape* love.

"I Have Gained Nothing"

In verse three, Paul writes...

"If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Paul brings his first section of "The LOVE Test" to a close by emphasizing the spiritual gift of giving. Once again, this is a gift that is easily put on public display. This is a gift that tempts most believers with the applause and admiration of people. Thus, Jesus commands His followers in the Sermon on the Mount to...

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is Heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do..." (Matt. 6:1-2)

So, Jesus says that when we give with the motivation to be praised by men we receive no reward in Heaven. Our reward is the fleeting applause and the vaporizing admiration of men. Paul continues this line of reasoning by saying that when our giving – both of personal possessions and even our life – is void of Christlike love, we gain nothing. We get no eternal return on our investment.

Giving without *agape* love gains us nothing. **Is your giving gaining "nothing"?**

Conclusion

There you have it, that's the first section of The LOVE Test. Here are the three specific questions Jesus wants you to answer this week:

1. Are you a noisy gong?
2. Have you become nothing?
3. Is your giving gaining nothing?

In no uncertain terms, God reminds us all that without love, we quickly become noisy gongs; without love, we quickly become nothing; without love, our giving gains nothing of eternal value.

Without love, we fail to fulfill our greatest purpose in life – to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Without love, we fail to fulfill our second greatest purpose in life – loving people. Without love, we become indistinguishable to the lost world. And...without love, we minimize the selfless sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Love is the most “excellent” way. It was, and still is, the way of God. It was, and still is, the way of Jesus Christ. And it must be the way of His followers – you and me.