

FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE

1st Corinthians 13:1-13

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¹ 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. ² 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 do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

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

⁸ 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. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ 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 the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a 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.

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

Message:

These beautiful and oft-quoted words of St. Paul about the surpassing importance of love are sometimes a little hard for us Lutherans to hear. We've spent countless hours in Sunday School and Bible study and worship being taught that we are saved by faith alone but Jesus says that love is greater than faith. If we are justified in God's eyes by faith and not by love, how can love be greater than faith?

Before we talk about love, let's be clear about what the Bible means when it talks about "faith" and "hope." Faith is confidence that Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sins by dying on the cross. We didn't come upon this faith on our own—we didn't reason our way to it or pull it out of our imagination. God created this faith in us when He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us at our baptism. He washed our sins away and made us children of our heavenly Father. And throughout our lives as believers, the Holy Spirit continues to counsel us by showing us our sins

and comfort us by showing us our Savior—nourishing our faith and helping us grow in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Faith is a gift of God.

Hope is simply faith applied to the future. Just as faith enables us to believe that Jesus' death on the cross atoned for all our sins, hope enables us to believe that he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to show us that we too will rise from the dead and ascend into heaven. Hope, like faith, is a gift of God.

But while faith and hope are gifts of God, love is a work of the law—something we do. Biblical love isn't emotion, it's action. If God had merely *felt* love for us and not acted to help us we would still be in a pickle. But thanks be to God, He showed his love by sending his Son to die on the cross to atone for our sins. This was ***love in action***. And just as God helped us by putting his love into action, He wants us to help others by putting our love into action. The Apostle John puts it perfectly in his *1st Letter*: "*Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*" (1 John 3:18)

How important is Biblical love? In his *First Letter to the Corinthians*, Paul writes: "*If I speak in 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 all 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!*" (1 Corinthians 13:1-2) To summarize what Paul is saying in these two verses: If I am a Christian who does not practice love, I mean nothing, I gain nothing, I amount to nothing and I am nothing. I can speak in tongues, I can prophesy and I can have enough faith to move mountains, but without love it amounts to NOTHING. That's how important love is.

Why don't we love each other better than we do? That's easy: it's because it's hard work, and we'd rather not do it. We're having too much fun playing with religion to want to actually go to work at it. I think that's why St. Paul says, "*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.*" (1 Corinthians 13:11) C. S. Lewis said the same thing in different words: "*God does not want to make us happy—he wants us to grow up.*" The fact is, however, we'd rather not grow up; it's more fun being children. Of course we Lutherans have another excuse for remaining spiritual adolescents: whenever we feel the pressure to do works of love, our lazy, rationalizing ego whispers in our ears, "Works righteousness!" and we remind ourselves that salvation is through faith alone. Well, yes, we are saved by faith—but God didn't give us faith to use as a pacifier, He gave us faith to put our gifts into action. When we use justification by faith as an excuse for leading loveless lives, when we refuse to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, we are abusing the grace we claim to treasure so much. We're saying—to the world at large and to our own brothers and sisters in Christ: "*I've got mine—you get your own.*"

The rationalizations are plentiful: *“It’s better to encourage self-sufficiency.” “The Lord helps those who help themselves.” “If I gave money to that beggar he’d just use it for drugs or booze.”* Try finding those excuses in the Bible. They’re all dodges, self-serving platitudes that have no place in the piety of a sincere Christian.

Does this make you feel guilty? I think that part of the reason we get uncomfortable when we we’re reminded of the importance of love is that we suspect we won’t end up doing anything about it—even though we know we should. But the fact that Biblical love is actually “do-able” should give us cause for rejoicing!! We can’t will ourselves to **feel** love for others, but we can will ourselves to **do** love for others. We WANT to do things which will please God, don’t we? Well, here’s a chance to do them.

Another problem we have is that we know that we should only do our good deeds out of gratitude toward God for what He has done for us and not in order to make ourselves look good in other people’s eyes. But it’s hard to keep vanity out of the transaction, isn’t it? Every time I leave a hospital after visiting a patient, there’s a little voice in my head that says, *“That was a nice thing for you to do!”* And anyway it’s hard to keep feeling grateful to God for something we’ve come to take for granted. But if we don’t feel grateful, doesn’t that spoil the good deed? Is any deed that doesn’t proceed from pure gratitude still a good deed? Isaiah wrote that apart from God, *“All our righteous acts are like filthy rags”* and we know God doesn’t need any filthy rags. (*Isaiah 64:6*) On the other hand, doesn’t that amount to an excuse to do nothing at all? But if we wait until we have pure hearts and selfless motives, we’ll still be waiting when Jesus returns.

If this is a stumbling block for you I have a suggestion: *Try leading with your actions and see if your heart doesn’t follow.* Jesus said, *“...where your treasure is, your heart will be there also.”* In other words, our hearts follow our investments. Invest your money in a company and you’ll start getting interested in it. You’ll check the stock price periodically, you’ll read the annual report and you’ll hope that the company thrives. Depending on how much you invested in it, you might even pray for it. Well, invest your time and energy in other people and you’ll become interested in them in the same way. You’ll check in on them and care about them and hope they do well. You’ll probably even pray for them. Your heart will follow your treasure.

One of the other things the Holy Spirit does is to equip us for every good work. You and I have the gift and the equipment and there’s nothing in the Bible that says we can’t put them both to work. I promise you that you won’t be punished for doing good deeds! At least not by God. I know they say that no good deed goes unpunished, and I know what they mean, but that isn’t in the Bible either. So why not go to work? Love—good, practical, hardworking, Biblical love—unleashes God’s power in the lives of others by displaying the divine glory of

saving faith to the unbelieving world. It's good evangelism. It's good worship. It's good religion.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world. He has opened up our eyes to his light by giving us faith and hope and He asks us to let His light shine through us to all mankind through acts of love. In His Sermon on the Mount, he says: *"...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."* (Matthew 6:16) When we "do" love to others in the name of Jesus Christ, we shine His light into their lives so that they too may be filled with His light and become conduits of His love. Luther said, *"Walk among your good deeds as in a paradise of God."*

Once at my former church I was visiting with a man who had begun attending services to see if he would like to become a member. He hadn't decided yet, but in the course of our conversation he said something which I have never forgotten. He said that during his life he had been a member of only two churches. He said that if he were to describe the first church in only two words, the words would be, "sound doctrine." If he were to describe the second, it would be with only one word: "love." I remember thinking, "Which way would I like people to describe our church?"

It was a no-brainer. In Christ Jesus,

Amen.

John 15:12-17

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.