

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
September 25, 2016

Spiritual Gifts: Hero or Zero

21st Century Lessons from a 1st Century Church

1 Corinthians 13

You hear this verse at weddings all the time:

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.

Isn't that a romantic passage about married love? Sounds like it when you read it all by itself. But there is **nothing romantic about love** when you read this passage in its context.

The context of this passage is spiritual gifts. The Christians in the congregation in Corinth wanted impressive spiritual gifts. They loved the idea of being able to speak in tongues or perform miracles. They wanted those kinds of spiritual gifts.

But Paul ends his discussion about different gifts in the church, in the body of Christ, by saying, "Now I will show you the most excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31). Then he talks about the necessary ingredient that, if you don't have it, **the greatest spiritual hero becomes a spiritual zero**. That ingredient is love.

So rather than picturing a romantic couple as we reread 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, picture the pointy-haired boss from the Dilbert cartoon or Bill Lumbergh from the movie *Office Space*. Picture that annoying cubicle neighbor that you can't stand. Picture the neighbor that you don't get along with. Picture the bully on the playground. Now let's listen again:

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.

There is nothing romantic about this word love. It is not an encouragement from God. It is a command. Love your neighbor as yourself.

- Be patient with the office idiot.
- Be kind to the playground bully.
- Don't be envious of the boss' or teacher's pet.
- Don't boast or be proud when you get a better grade or annual review than others.
- Don't dishonor your boss among your friends even though he is a jerk.

- Don't get angry when your co-worker makes the same mistake he has made a thousand times!
- Don't keep a record of the times your spouse forgot your birthday.
- Always protect your neighbor's reputation.
- Always trust or hope. Put the best possible construction on everything your boss does.
- Always endure. Don't give up on anyone.

Even though this section is often used at a wedding, it leaves me beaten and bruised. When I really think about love as God describes it through Paul's words, I've failed. I am a sinner!

That makes the first paragraph of this chapter even harder to hear:

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.

There is nothing gained without love!

Let these words sink in. We can do great things. We can have great gifts. But if we don't have love it is all worth nothing.

Notice it doesn't say, "You will be diminished or you'll have less." It says, "I am nothing!" It says, "I gain nothing!"

Think about that in the interactions you've had this past week. Did you get something accomplished at work... but not have love? You gained nothing. Did you get an "A" on a test but failed to love your classmate? You got zero. Did you fail to love your mom or dad, your brother or sister, your wife or your husband? All your accomplishments this past week amount to nothing.

Paul's final thought is that **there is nothing that lasts other than love.**

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.

Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God? It was a question the 12 disciples raised among themselves over and over. It is a question that comes to our minds too. As a pastor, am I greater because I serve at a larger church? Is some other pastor greater because his congregation is growing exponentially and ours is not?

Is that woman greater because her kids seem better behaved than mine? Is that man over there greater because he drives a better car than me?

Paul's point is that all this stuff is going to pass away. That can't be a lasting measure of greatness in the kingdom of God.

The Corinthians aspired to greater spiritual gifts... but they were all going to pass away. We can appreciate the gift of Bible knowledge that a seminary professor has now. But someday when we are in heaven, we'll all know more than he does. That's what Paul means that now we think and reason like a child or see just a reflection. Knowledge. Prophecy. Speaking in languages you don't know. All these are gifts only for this world. In the end, they won't last.

But love... that is the one thing that lasts forever. Love will be present for all eternity. That's what we want to strive for!

That's why this is a tough chapter for me to read. Sometimes I may think of myself as a spiritual hero. Others may look at me that way. But when I take an honest look at myself, I have to admit that I am a spiritual zero. I have not loved as God has called me to love.

That's what happens when you go to God's Word. It will reveal your sin and guilt before God if you look at it honestly.

But Paul didn't say this to leave his readers in despair. He spoke about love so that they might strive to be a hero, that they might strive to love even as God has loved them. With that in mind, I'd like to explain what I mean in our outline by saying, "Go to the GYM."

When we don't like the way our bodies look, we can go to the gym and work out. Where is the gym where we can work on growing in love?

You can't do it in isolation. You can learn about God in isolation. You can lock yourself in a room and meditate on God's Word. But the place you actually learn to love is where you can practice it, a place where you interact with others. That is the main reason why we want every one of us here today to be in some kind of a group... whether it be in an organized Bible study or just a casual group of Christians that you interact with regularly.

It is in a group that you learn what love means.

I would encourage you to go to www.smallgroupchurches.com/the-59-one-anothers-of-the-Bible to read over the 59 "one another" commands of the Bible. You can learn academically what it means to love one another, but to actually put it into practice, you need to be around people.

It is when you are in a group, that you find out the place that needs to change: Yourself!

I remember that in our first small group effort here about 10 years ago, Rick Warren talked about EGR's in your small group. An EGR is the "extra-grace-required" person. He said that if you don't immediately know who the EGR in your group is... it's you!

It is when you are interacting with other sinful human beings like yourself that you begin to understand more your own sin. And the place that needs to change is you.

Now how do you change? How do you become more loving?

Let's go back to Psalm 51 and take a look.

King David failed to love... he failed to love his wives (yes, he had more than one), he failed to love his body guard Uriah whom he murdered, he failed to love Uriah's wife Bathsheba with whom he had an affair. David failed to love everyone around him. So what did he do to change himself?

First of all he confessed his sin:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

²Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.

⁵Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Then he claimed God's forgiveness.

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

In Christ, our sins have been washed away. Our failures to love are forgiven. Don't let Satan beat you up because of your past sins. They are forgiven!

Then he asked God to change him.

Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Then he sought to practice what he had learned.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.

That is the ultimate goal of our small groups. I call it **Muscle Memory**.

When you exercise, gradually you don't even have to think about things. Your muscles just learn to act. A gymnast on a balance beam doesn't think about staying balanced. Her muscles have learned what to do without conscious thought to keep her on that beam.

So too, a small group is a place to learn muscle memory. It happens not just in the muscles of your legs or arms. It happens in the muscle of your head too. Each time your brother or sister in Christ says something that helps you better understand love, your mind forms another connection. Each time you then strive to put it into practice, your mind forms another connection.

A small group is a place to put love into practice, being encouraged and seeing it modeled in other Christians, so that it becomes part of your spiritual muscle memory. So that you are more loving in your daily interactions at work or school.

That's why, if you aren't part of a small group now, and you don't have a close circle of Christian friends with whom you regularly talk about your faith, then register for GroupLink on the Connection Card. Get connected in a small group.

I am looking forward to studying *Who is This Man?* with my small group this fall. I am looking forward to the idea of seeing the impact that Jesus has made on the world and on our own personal lives. But it will all boil down to this: Jesus made such impact on the world because he loved the world and was willing to give up his life for the world.

Brothers and sisters, will you join me in praying: Lord Jesus, make me like yourself. Help me act in self-sacrificing love that I can make an eternal impact on this world for you. Amen.

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My Next Steps

- **Learn what love means:** Look up www.SmallGroupChurches.com/the-59-one-anothers-of-the-Bible to see what love in action looks like.
- **Practice what love means:** Be a part of a small group. Register for GroupLink (Sunday, October 2 at 6:30 pm) on the Connection Card.
- **Love by serving:** Read 1 Corinthians 14 in preparation for next week's message that will wrap up our study of spiritual gifts.