

**1 Corinthians 13:1-13**  
**(Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 22:34-40)**  
**“The Preeminent Mark of the Spirit’s Presence”**

**Introduction**

This Pentecost Sunday morning, I want us to consider together the preeminent sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence, the great spring from which the church’s life should flow. It is the church’s core value because it is the core value of God’s kingdom. It is, in other words, what God desires to do in and through us whenever we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Well, then, what is it? The summary of the OT law is this: Love the Lord with all your heart, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus affirmed these words as describing the great desire of God’s heart. At the end of his life, Jesus said to his disciples, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). In his clearest statement of the gospel of grace, the letter to the Galatians, Paul summarizes his message in these words: “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6). The apostle John, in his first letter, repeats the call to love one another, “for love comes from God.” He goes on to say, “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:7,16).

In our text, Paul is addressing a church that is greatly gifted and has experienced the power of the Holy Spirit’s presence. *But its strengths have become its weaknesses, because it lacks the core value of love. Its gifts have led to pride, boasting and division. Paul wants them to realize that everything they are and everything they do amounts in the end to nothing if it is not an expression of the love that moved the living God to create us, and when we had rebelled against him, to save us and restore us to himself, a love that his Spirit pours into the lives of those whom he has redeemed.*

There has never, to my knowledge, been an ecumenical church council or gathering of biblical scholars to discuss the implications of what is clearly the central theme of the Scriptures, and the core value of God’s kingdom. The theological center of most evangelical thinking has been faith, salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Others have centered their thinking on hope, and focused on the future that God has promised to his children in a new heaven and new earth. These are certainly foundational concepts. We receive God’s grace through faith, and our anxiety and despair are turned to hope for the future. Here Paul makes it clear that while “these three remain, faith, hope and love ... the greatest of these is love” (13:13). Yet, the church simply does not emphasize love in the same way as it does faith and hope. We need to revisit this text frequently, for Paul tells us here, not only *that* love is essential, but *why* love is essential.

## Body

### 1. Love is the key to meaning (13:1-3).

Without love, all that I *am* amounts to nothing (13:2). Paul begins by describing people who have the kind of demonstrative gifts that were so highly valued at Corinth: speaking in tongues, gifts of prophecy and discernment, faith that works miracles. All of these things would suggest a profound and mature spirituality. But Paul says that without love, those so gifted amount to nothing.

Without love, all that I *do* amounts to nothing (13:3). He describes those whom we most revere as holy: those who give all they have to the poor, and those who give their bodies in a martyr's death. Yet Paul again warns that such things, wonderful as they appear, are worth nothing to God if they are not motivated by love. Why is this so?

### 2. Love is the key to character (13:4-7).

What Paul describes here is basically what in his Galatian letter he refers to as "the fruit of the Spirit," that is, the mark of a life being lived under the renewing influence of God's Spirit. That is the goal, it is what we seek when we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven." In Galatians, love leads the list. Here, Paul shows that love leads the list, not because it is one of the fruit of the Spirit, but because it is the essence of all of the fruit. All the other aspects of a gracious and mature character are quite awful when encountered only in their formal expression, without arising from a heart possessed by self-sacrificing love.

### 3. Love is the key to wisdom (13:8-12).

A mature person recognizes the limits of his knowledge. He is not arrogant and un-teachable. With Paul, he says, "Now I know in part" (13:12). He is able to dismiss the pretensions and presumptions of modernity, without giving in to the pessimism and confusion of post-modernity. He says, "I am able to know truth, but not yet all the truth there is to know. With regard to God's truth, I am often in the position of a child who is learning, growing, seeking, but needs others to help, to teach and mentor."

This loving humility makes us treasure the cultural and theological breadth of the church of Jesus Christ, so that we can discover more and more of what God has revealed by discovering that part of God's truth that he has shown more clearly from his Word and world-setting to those of other eras or cultures. Mission becomes, not just our gift to others, but also their gift back to us.

#### **4. All of this is so because love is the very essence of the life of God (13:13).**

Of the three things that remain – faith, hope and love – only love will survive death. Faith is the acceptance of truth based on the credible testimony of others. When we are at last with the Lord, faith will have changed to sight. Hope is that for which we long. When what we longed for is present, we no longer hope; we enjoy. But love is the heart of the relationship that God intended us to have with him and with one another. It begins now and never ends.

#### **Conclusion**

When we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven,” we are praying for God’s love to seek and find us, and through us, to seek and find others, beginning with those closest to us, and reaching out to those whom we would never even notice or care about, had God not first sought us and found us, and poured his love into our hearts.

When we ask the Lord to let us experience more fully and completely than ever before the power of his life poured out at Pentecost, we are praying that our lives, our desires and affections, our words and our deeds, might be motivated and marked supremely by the self-sacrificing love of the One who loves us and gave himself for us.

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