

## Prayers

### **To God**

*Rest in the Lord's love and accept His will for your life today. Receive His blessing and pray with a confident spirit.*

### **For myself**

*Ask the Lord Jesus to come into your life and reveal to you those difficult things you do not see, perhaps the truth about how others see you, your mannerisms and your habits. Let the Holy Spirit strip you down so that you can be built up in the image of God!*

### **For others**

**Father God, speak to the people of this world  
With the eternal language of peace  
Father God, handle this troubled world  
With the healing touch of your hand  
Father God, look upon the waste of this world  
With the creative power of Your Holy Spirit  
Father God, do what comes natural to you  
And love what You have made. AMEN**

## Meditation

Listen carefully;  
hear the voice of the Lord,  
and determine to walk forever in His ways.

Learn intelligently;  
know what God requires of you,  
so let His light shine clear upon your pathway.

Work diligently;  
give all for the Kingdom of God,  
and live to see its fruitfulness here on earth.

Evaluate shrewdly;  
discern the truth, right from wrong,  
Live according to the good and reject the bad

Share liberally;  
for Jesus has charged His people  
to love and forgive each other with no exception.

Speak boldly;  
preach the Gospel as you can,

and you will find God's blessings overflowing!

## Bible Passage

### 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

<sup>1</sup> If I speak in earthly and heavenly tongues but have no love, I am no more than a deafening bell or a crashing cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have a prophetic gift and know all mysteries and have all knowledge, and if I have all the faith necessary to move mountains, but have no love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I feed the poor by giving away all I have, or if I could boast even that I have given away my own body, but have no love, I accomplish nothing.

## Review

There is an awesome majesty about these words, because they describe what is probably the most important characteristic of humanity; 'love'. Our reading today is the first three verses of a magnificent hymn of praise to love, famously occupying the whole of 1 Corinthians 13, and speaking perhaps more powerfully about the meaning of love than any other writing penned. I invite you to read the verses of this passage, indeed the whole chapter, and allow it all to sink into your minds so the Holy Spirit can reveal to you something of the beauty and power of God's love. I shall now begin to offer my own comments on these incredible words; but this passage is so powerful, the Holy Spirit may speak to you directly of God's love despite my explanations, and if this is so you must follow the revelation; so be it.

### ***Love, the creative heart of God and the desire of all His creation***

The overriding message here is that without love, nothing makes sense, and nothing is accomplished; *'if ... I have no love, I am nothing'* (13:2). It is a stark message, but it summarises the Gospel. After all, the essential nature of God is that He is Love; so true faith, righteousness, hope, holiness, and much more, even life itself, is found ultimately in the heart of God, which is love. Moreover, if God is at the heart of a universe He has created, then it is built on love, it works by love, and love will reveal both the meaning of life and its ultimate purpose. Having said this, the supreme evidence of God's love is found in Jesus' selfless sacrifice on the Cross, by which both men and women may be reconciled to God and find peace with Him.

These are grand statements; but much everyday life seems far removed from these high ideals. People become chronically ill for no clear reason, even people of faith; children suffer when it is no fault of their own; people are killed throughout the world through blatant inhumanity, religious strife seems to be the order of the day in some places, and more. Each of us lives balanced between the positives and negatives of life, and sometimes the good in life prevails and we are happy, but the evils around us so easily pull us down and we find it hard to raise our spirits even with all the love given to us by others. Yet we yearn for love, and in our hearts we know that love alone can rescue us from the worst things; after 'a hard day at the office', we naturally seek the love of those close to us or the comfort of spiritual security.

### ***'Without love ... I am nothing' - a peculiar message!***

Our passage today speaks of love mystically, and reflects our true experience of it. Love must be explored, found and extracted from the dross of human experience so that its purity can minister to us and our whole lives. Equally, Paul presents love here from a negative background; I summarise the passage; *'if I do X without love, I am irrelevant; if I have Y but no love, I am nothing, if I do Z good things without love, I accomplish nothing'* (13:1-3). There are two possible reactions to this. We must either give up on life as a bad job, as some do; alternatively, we can respond by seeking love as the very secret of life, the key that opens the door to the Father's heart, which will open up our own future in God's Kingdom. In truth, love comes into its own when in the midst of trouble it is most sorely needed, or when life is hard and we need the love of others.

But if we are to make anything of what Paul says here we must first understand what the Bible means by this word 'love'. Then we will be in a place to explore these three verses in greater depth, and discover the very different things said by each verse. But I do not simply mean that we must look at the famous Greek word

used here, 'agape'. Many a preacher has dwelt on this fascinating word, but we gain most from going back to the Old Testament to uncover the three key features of God's great 'covenant' love.

### ***The Covenant love of God***

Put simply, the love of God has three characteristics; it is faithful, free, and sacrificial.

- **Faithfulness** is the quality of God's 'covenant' love described in Psalm 117, '*great is His faithful love for us ... which endures forever*' (117:2). God's love does not change; we may change and the world may change, but His does not. It may not always seem like that to us, but this truth lies hidden within the universe and is available to us only by faith.
- Alongside this, God's love is **undeserved and free**. So, for example, after the great king David, chosen to bear in the ancestral line the Saviour of the world, had committed adultery and then confessed, God forgave him freely. His love for David and David's love for God continued (2 Samuel 11f.), because of God's power to forgive.
- God's love is also **sacrificial**. God tried everything to help His people overcome their endemic tendency to sin against Him, but ultimately, as the prophet Isaiah saw, only the sacrificial death of God's own servant would shock and change the world, making true life and salvation available to all (Isaiah 53,60,61).

We are called in Christ to live according to God's faithful, free and sacrificial love.

### ***The first verse - tongues, bells and crashing cymbals!***

Looking carefully at each verse of our passage, we begin with the first; '*if I speak in earthly and heavenly tongues but have no love, then ...*' (13:1). Now, we know this verse, but what does this mean? I suggest it means that without love, the favoured worship method used at the church in Corinth of speaking in tongues (see chapter 14) was nothing but offensive noise! The message for us is the same; the church's public worship cannot be made up from the exercise of one spiritual gift. But I suggest we go further. All the worship of the church is meaningless before God and others unless somehow, love is shown! Paul was telling the Corinthians that for all their love of 'tongues' and worshipping God, there could be no substitute for life demonstrating love in action. How easy it is to be consumed by religious fervour and forget the message of God in Christ!

### ***The second verse - prophecy, knowledge and faith***

Verse 2 moves the subject further on. Paul says; '*if I have a prophetic gift ... have all knowledge ... and faith to move mountains but have no love, I am nothing*'. Paul has described here in microcosm the activities of the Christian community in which spiritual gifts of prophecy and knowledge are used alongside faith, classically described using Jesus' own definition of '*faith ... to move mountains*'. Yet all these treasured features of Christian life are as nothing to love! Without love, everything the church does and stands for has no credibility in the world, and is therefore useless for its mission! If we were not used to these words we might be affronted that Paul says such things about Jesus' own description of faith, for example; but he stands firm. Without love, the mission of God in Christ is compromised.

### ***The third verse - practical and spiritual generosity***

Verse 3 is the last in this stunning sequence, and it challenges us to the core; '*if I feed the poor by giving away all I have ... or give away my own body, but have no love, I accomplish nothing*'. Throughout his letter, Paul has called the Corinthians to put their faith into practice, and he has given them strong guidelines about what they must do. Yet here, Paul takes the supreme example of Christian charitable works, which is to feed the poor, even to the extent of '*giving away my own body*' which is a simple exaggeration meaning that everything is given away even life itself, and he stands firm in his message. Without love, none of this either makes sense or has any consequence for the Kingdom of God. So for this reason, all the social and charitable works of the church, with even the most amazing radical efficiency, has no relevance for the Kingdom of God. That is, without everything we mean by love; faithful, free and sacrificial love.

### ***Conclusion?***

So what is the cure to this remarkable and profoundly negative passage of Scripture? Surely, it is to focus on everything Scripture says about the love of God, and put it into practice. Only then will speaking in tongues, prophecy, worship, charitable giving and almost everything we do in the life of the church, have meaning and purpose for the Kingdom of God. Grumpy, dissatisfied, angry, gloomy or disenchanting Christians are not effective for the Gospel, and they do not convey the Word of life and love they claim to represent!

What price then the greatest spiritual gift which is love? How then can God's people be enabled to be utterly faithful in love towards one another, sacrificial in giving and willing to love even the unlovely and those who do not deserve it? Love comes exclusively from the heart of the Father, as seen in the Son, and as put into effect in our lives by His Spirit. Without this, we are truly lost.

## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***Putting love back into the church***

This passage is a fundamental challenge to all God's people to reflect the love of God in all they do. Love is the greatest and most valuable gift of all, by which we demonstrate the truth about God within the world. The challenge we all face is how to do this.

Given that Paul uses some clear examples here to illustrate his theme that '*without love*' our faith and witness is '*nothing*', we should consider the lack of love that can too often blight the Christian community. I will only give one example here; think for a moment about the controversies within the church about speaking in tongues, and consider the damage this does. No one understands what we are talking about! So unless we handle the whole matter of tongues with love and charity, we risk alienating people from our faith and our worship, a theme Paul takes up in the next chapter.

#### ***Putting love back into faith and witness***

Paul consciously captures something of all the main feature of church life in these words. He refers to prophecy and learning (knowledge), all of which are essential for the preacher. He speaks of faith, which lies at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. He also speaks of charitable work and the extremes of giving necessary if the poor are really to be fed.

All of this requires our love; that is, our faithful and never ending love, our sacrificial and consuming love and our free and selfless love. Putting this into practice validates the Kingdom of God of which we are servants, and for which we strive under the authority of God.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- *How can you show the love of God in what you do, and what barriers must be overcome to do this?*
- *Think carefully about what the love of God is, and what it means to you, for this will go to the heart of your faith and how you live the Christian life.*

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. *What does this passage teach us about love, from a positive point of view*
2. *How can we exercise the gifts of the spirit with love today; what does this mean in general, and 2for all the spiritual gifts?*
3. *What extreme forms of Christian discipleship are found today, and why do they attract interest? Can they be expressed with love?*

## Final Prayer

Thank You Jesus for Your love. Thank You for giving Your life so that I might this love, and thank You for never ceasing to be by my side even in the most difficult things. In Your faithfulness is my hope, and in Your acceptance I find peace. Hallelujah! **AMEN**