**LOVE IS ...**

1 Co 12:31b-13:13 (K. V.: 13:4)

**“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”**

We are gearing toward the end of 1 Corinthians study. So far, we have covered many essential topics about the church including the communion and the gifts. Through Dr. Jason’s message last week, we were taught that the one and the same Spirit gives different gifts to us so that we might edify each other and thus become one in Christ. Hence, our motto as a church would be as follows: unity in diversity or one body, many parts. Surely, we all are just different parts of the body of Christ and do not need to envy or compete with others. Today, we are going to go a little deeper onto the same subject, namely, the greatest gift. Chapter 12 had a nickname, so-called, the chapter of gifts, and today’s chapter has one as well: the chapter of love. Its length is short, but its content is profound, possibly more profound than any other chapters in the whole Bible. May God bless us as we ponder upon what love is and thus make us a strong community of love.

1. **Love Analysis (12:31b-13:7)**

This chapter of love actually started when Paul urged the Corinthians to eagerly desire greater gifts and said that he would show them the most excellent way (12:31). What is “this most excellent way?” There are many interpretations for this phrase but let us safely take it as “the best is yet to come.” Look at verses 1-3. In this short paragraph, we encounter the same expression, “If I …” again and again about four times. With this “If I …,” Paul wants to emphasize the importance of love in relations to the spiritual gifts (about six different ones) by which they had some issues. Verse 1 reads. “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.” Here, “speaking in the tongues of men” comes first because probably it was the most serious problem there. In those days, in Corinth particular, when someone spoke a different language other than Greek, people were impressed. If he could speak multiple languages, “the tongues of men,” that would make him very special. Moreover, if that person possessed charisma and eloquence, “the tongue of angels,” he might be accepted as a great preacher. Without love, however, Paul says it would be nothing but a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. So, through verse 1, emphasizes the uselessness of the gift of the tongues however impressive and eloquent it would be. Look at verse 2. In this verse, Paul mentions three gifts in a row: (i) prophecy (ii) knowledge and (iii) faith. If someone could prophesy, he is a prophet, God’s messenger. Remember Jesus was once regarded as one of the prophets (Mt 16:14). What great honor would that be? What about fathoming all mysteries and all knowledge? Jesus said those things were hidden from the wise and learned, but were revealed to little children. So, when we can fathom such things, we are not only considered privileged and intelligent but also innocent and pure like little children. A faith that can move mountains is something that only special people like Elijah and Moses could possess. Are there anything more? In verse 3, Paul even mentions that the gift of almsgiving like donating all-your-possessions and martyrdom-like endurance would be valueless without love. Surely, as Paul earlier mentioned, we are encouraged to crave great gifts and yet when those gifts are practiced without love, there is no meaning in there.

Now look at verses 4-7. Here we can see the characteristics of love in details. There are about three positives and eight negatives of love and if we include four positive action words in verse 7, the total number of words for characterizing is 15. Note that out of all the characteristics of love, Paul mentions “patience” and “kindness” first. Why patience and kindness? It is because God’s patience and kindness first led us to repentance and thus salvation. It is impossible to think of love without patience and kindness in the first place. Surely, that is God’s characteristic. In Genesis, we see how long God was patient with Abraham (for 25 years) and with Israel (for 40 years) despite their unfaithfulness and unrepentance. God suffered for a long time in bearing them and helping them. No wonder “patience” is in another translation, “long-suffering.” “Kindness” is a nature that is good, benevolent, sympathetic, or helpful. Sometimes, this kindness is extended to animals and even enemies. When Abraham’s servant tried to find the perfect match for his master’s son, Isaac, one of the conditions he earnestly prayed for was kindness to a needy person and even to animals. Rebekah was exactly like that, and she gave drinks to camels.

The next one and beyond are all in negative forms until we see rejoicing with the truth part. The first negative of love has something to do with “envy.” Envy is one of the oldest sins from the time of Cain and Abel. Envy does not end very well. Remember what happened to Cain when he envied his brother? He ended up killing his own brother. What about “boasting”? It is one of the basic human natures that nobody can help. We tend to boast about what we have, what we do, what we know, and this list goes on and on. When we boast, we feel better and superior to others and yet it causes others to suffer. And envy surely leads one to be proud. Sometimes, to make one boastful and proud, he or she actively dishonors others. Discrediting and denying others usually make the good relationship with others broken. And he or she does not stop there. The person is self-seeking and sometimes easily angered when things do not go his or her way. We can understand why there are so many cases of road rage. It is because people are easily angered for a small thing like cut-ins. Or people keep record of wrongdoings and do the crazy things like disgruntled employees returning to their old workplace with vengeful intentions. Some people even delight in evil. We do not quite understand why people do that, but we should be careful because what we are going to talk about shortly.

The Bible clearly tells us that we have the original sin, that is, the sinful nature. Listen to what God had to say after the Flood. He said that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time (Ge 6:5). If we include another verse in Genesis and still another one in the Psalms, we know we are not good or evil from childhood and even from birth. We may have to understand that before talking about “love,” we have to acknowledge these sinful tendencies exist within us. How can we overcome those tendencies? The Bible tells us that when live accordance with the Spirit and when we walk by the Spirit, our mind is not governed by such sinful desires but by the Spirit (Ro 8:5-9; Gal 5:16). How is love related to the truth? Love rejoices with the truth. Love is sincere and cannot not go with falsehood. In our Friday meeting, one man of God pointed out that in this world, we are indoctrinated with false or partial truth. Or with selfish truth. So, what we need is to seek truth in good Bible study. During the hectic weeks, what I really craved was a good Bible study on Friday. It was because there were so many issues in weekdays and my soul was so dog-tired. Yet when I focused on the truth revealed in God’s words, I was restored and rejuvenated. May God help us to rejoice with the Bible study time so that we may be men and women of truth.

Look at verse 7 again. Here we see four action verbs “protects,” “trusts,” “hopes,” and “perseveres.” These are for building up others. We can see how Jesus, Barnabas, and the Father God did that in the following illustrations. Jesus protected His disciples when they were in trouble in the grainfields. And He prayed for their protection and that of His future (Mk 2:23-26; Jn 17:15). While no other people believed in Paul’s conversion, Barnabas trusted in Paul and brought him to the apostles so that he might be preciously used for the gospel work among the Gentiles (Ac 9:26-28). Jesus had a high hope for Peter and changed his name to Cephas so that he might become the Rock of the church. He also had a hope that after his failure he would come back and be preciously used for restoring others (Jn 1:42; Lk 22:32). Just like a loving father persevered until his prodigal son would come back, we may have to persevere that our brother or sister might be restored (Lk 15:20). If there is any progression for these action words for love, that would be from narrowness to broadness, from a physical and tangible realm to the metaphysical and invisible realm. May God make us protectors, trustors, hopers and perseveres of all times.

1. **Fully Know; Fully Known (13:8-13)**

Look at verse 8. Paul says that love never fails. Alternatively, we can say love never ends. Unlike this never-failing and never-ending love, all other spiritual gifts will cease, be stilled, and pass away. When Jesus comes again, all the prophecies will have been fulfilled, so there is no need for any more prophecy. When the new Heavens and the new earth are established, there will be only one language remaining, so all other languages are not needed. No more language barriers! There will be no more need for knowledge because the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:9). The most valuable thing is love and this does and will help us in using our gifts. Love connects every gift together.

Look at verses 9-12. Here Paul shares his vision of fullness or completeness and his personal testimony about maturity. Paul says that our knowledge and prophecies are partial because completeness has not come yet. When it comes, such partialness will disappear and there will only be perfection and completeness. Paul illuminates on this with his own experience. Verse 11 reads. “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.” Have you heard about it before? It is like a duck test. “If it looks like a duck, sounds like a duck, and walks like a duck, then it is a duck.” Surely, if I talk like a child, think like a child, and reason like a child, I am a child! We mean spiritually! It is the inevitable manifestation of a spiritually immature person. Somehow, it is a subtle and indirect way of reprimanding the Corinthians for their immaturity and asking them not to be spiritual midgets anymore.

Look at verse 12. Here we see Paul’s hope, that is ours as well. “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.” Back then, bronze mirrors were only available, not like the glass mirrors of today. So, the images we could see in a mirror was a poor reflection of ourselves. Paul now says that when the Day comes, we shall see Jesus our Lord face to face. It is just like our online Zoom meetings are good, but it is not as good as in-person, face-to-face meetings. Clearly, what we will have until that time is partial, incomplete knowledge. At that time, however, we will fuller, better, and more complete knowledge of Him. As Jesus promised, we will have life to the full (Jn 10:10). He will know us, and we will know him like the good shepherd and good sheep toward each other (Jn 10:14).

Look at verse 13. This verse is one of the most famous quotes in the Bible. And we see three essentials in Christian life: faith, hope and love. In the book of Pilgrim’s Progress, during his journey to the Celestial City, Christian, the main character, had faithful and hopeful or faith and hope all the time and he could come to his ultimate destination with their help. Perhaps, love was there as well. And Paul says the greatest among three is love. What should be most important to us in our struggle to grow as Christians? That is love. Love can cover our mistakes and reconnects us and eventually make us become like Christ. May God help us to cherish these three essentials and love specifically.

In conclusion, we learned that having great gifts like tongues, knowledge and faith is useless if we do not have love. And love starts with patience and kindness which are the characteristic of God. Many negatives we should be careful such as envy and boasting, but we should actively participate in protecting and persevering. May God help us to intently look forward to fullness and strengthen us to build a community of love when we practice love.