

"Love Is the Greatest. Why?"

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

God grant to each of us the grace to live each day as though yesterday was Christmas, today is Easter, and tomorrow is Judgment Day. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians, one of the great and continuing joys in the life of the child of God is the sure and certain knowledge that we do not, and cannot, pay for even one single sin. This is such a profound comfort because it leaves absolutely no doubt about our eternal future. How so? Since the payment for sins does not lie within our ability or within our sphere of influence, there is no way we can mess the payment up with our usual failures and inconsistencies. The payment was made – in full – by another, and the books have been forever reconciled, closed. God the Father has declared the innocent death of his Son to be of greater value than the sum total of all of mankind's sin. In other words, no matter how many or how great the sins of the human race, the payment of Jesus Christ was more than enough to pay for that sin.

How then can anyone be lost? Only through unbelief – the rejection of Jesus (actively or passively) as the one and only Savior from sin.

Why, again, is this such a comfort? Because we pick badly, and we exhibit such profound inconsistency. If you and I had to guess at the path to heaven, or if we had to save ourselves by our own *consistent* acts of righteousness, we would, without question, fail. God's Word tells us so. Temper, emotion, impatience, frustration, pride – all combine to taint and condemn to failure even the most elementary decisions in life. You and I never want our eternal futures to depend on our actions. Jesus alone is our hope.

Here is where our text for this morning proves especially helpful. Along with all of Holy Scripture, these sacred words this morning not only point the correct (and only) path to heaven, they provide perfect guidance in this and countless other questions that challenge us during our time of grace on earth. Our text is found recorded in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the Thirteenth Chapter:

ESV **1 Corinthians 13:1-13** *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I*

deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ ¶ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ ¶ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

So far the verbally inspired words of God himself. What a comfort to know that these words are altogether true and right, **"profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."** With complete confidence in the Word of God we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"** Amen.

Occasionally I am reminded of the fact that things look different from the outside looking in than they do from the inside looking out. Lives, for example, that look glamorous and exciting from the outside, often look hollow and lonely on the inside. Individuals who appear pious and righteous on the outside, see their own sinful thoughts and deeds from the inside. Jobs, families, congregations – all almost always look better from the outside looking in, but the insider's view in all these cases is the more accurate.

Yet isn't it interesting that the insider's view can also, at times, be the *least* accurate and *most unrealistic*. Sometimes our own faults escape "beneath the radar" of our own awareness; that is, our most glaring weaknesses are hidden from view simply because they reside too close to home. For example, despite the fact that our eyes are set more or less in the middle of our faces, we would have no idea what our faces looked like if not for the aid of a mirror – something that reflects back what other see. So it is that we commonly miss the things closest to us; like the mistakes we make in raising or disciplining our children, or the impressions we give by the way we talk or act, or even the image we present by how we dress or care for our bodies. The

point here for us this morning is that we not only at times see ourselves as *worse* than others see us, we also at times see ourselves as *better than we really are*. (We are truly mixed up creatures.)

The same sort of phenomenon holds true in a Christian congregation. At times we can honestly recognize our own faults and shortcomings. At times these things develop gradually and they have to be pointed out to us by an outside observer; or by the Holy Spirit through his Word. We have crystal clear examples of this sort of thing in the Seven Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation 2-3. Some interesting questions present themselves as you read through these letters. Do you suppose, for example, that the members of the Church in Ephesus knew that they were loveless? Probably not until the Holy Spirit pointed it out to them. I'm sure they knew all of the positive things mentioned in that letter: the works, the labors, the patience, the lack of toleration for false teachers or for evil in general. On the other hand I wonder if any at all recognized that they had **"lost their first love."** So also do you imagine that Pergamos saw itself as a "compromising church" (tolerating false teachers), or that Thyatira believed they were a "corrupt church," or that Sardis thought of itself as a "dead church," or Laodicea as a "lukewarm church"? All of these churches had their strong points. We can't help but wonder if they knew anything about their weak points.

What about us? Do we have blind spots? How can we know? And is it really that important?

We answer the last question first. Is it really that important? Remember the Holy Spirit's words to Ephesus - the church that lacked only love: **"Remember therefore from where you have fallen: repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent."** The answer is yes, it is vitally important that we learn to recognize our own sinful weaknesses. Here, in fact, is where our text for this morning, together with the Letters to the Seven Churches, and our own congregation all intersect; and they meet at this great truth from our text: **"Without love, faith is nothing."**

Have you ever been caught up short by a particular Bible verse? Several parts of this inspired text have that effect on many Christians – and here is where we also return to the comfort of not having to make even simple choices to save our souls. Suppose God the Father gave you a multiple choice test as to which of these three is greatest and most important – faith, hope, or love. Which would you have chosen? My guess is that I would probably have chosen *faith*. Think about it for a moment. Is love greater than faith? Our text tells us **"without love we are nothing,"** but

what about faith? How can we be *nothing* if we have faith? Doesn't God's Word tell us that if saving faith is found in our hearts on Judgment Day, we will inherit eternal life in heaven? So how can love be more important than faith? When we have faith, we are indeed "something" in God's eyes. The inspired words of Holy Scripture teach us that we are God's children through faith in Jesus. Certainly that is more than "nothing" to God.

The point here is that *without love there can be no faith*.

What could the Holy Spirit mean by **"I am nothing"** but that saving faith cannot be present in the absence of love? A man with saving faith is a Child of God. God would never refer to one of his own dear children as **"nothing."** It is clear then that *without love, faith is dead. It does not, cannot, exist.*

This thing about *love* is serious business after all, isn't it? When we first hear that we might lack love, we imagine that our good ship of faith has just grazed the iceberg and will continue to steam along its merry way, bound for heaven. Our text makes it clear that the damage must be repaired, or we will most certainly sink. It is not possible to have a saving faith without love, for love and faith cannot be separated.

What then, we begin to wonder, is this "love" that we need so desperately? What is it, and how do we know if we've got it or not? Here is the slippery part - trying to define this special "love." This love is not simply a feeling, and it is not simply an action. It is both of those things, and more. Our text draws a picture as good as human words can produce. It does so by telling us both what this love is, and what it is not. **"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ ¶ Love never ends."**

We begin to see both why the love described in our text is so difficult to define and why it is so important to the child of God. This is not something we can provide for ourselves. Something so magnificent can only come from God. *"Without love there can be no faith"* is a true statement simply because only God-given faith in our Lord Jesus Christ can produce such love in the human heart. We have often been guilty of treating love as a spice of luxury in the bread of faith. It is rather *the* essential ingredient. It is that which you cannot remove without ruining all.

The second fact demonstrated so clearly by our text is that *without love, deeds cannot be good*. Though it is true, as James says in his Letter, that we ought to **"show our faith by our works,"** it is also true that **"without faith** (which cannot be separated from love) **it is impossible to please God."** Our text spells it out in words that even our own dulls minds can hardly fail to understand: **"If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."** To put it still another way, *"Even if I do all the right things, I have done nothing at all in God's eyes if I have not done it out of love."*

Here again we look into our own hearts and often see very little of the love described in our text. We cannot, for example, take our own name, put it in place of the word "love" in our text, and have it ring true. Give it a try; see if it holds up. More often than not we are not **"patient and kind."** We do not **rejoice in the truth, bear all things, hope all things, believe all things."** In fact the negative list usually describes us better. We **"envy, boast, are puffed up, behave rudely, seek our own, are provoked, think evil thoughts, and rejoice in evil."**

What am I to learn from all of this – that I am not a Child of God after all? By the grace of God we are indeed his children and heirs of heaven. What we are here to learn is rather that we are indeed sinners. Yet here too is where we have to stop looking at our own hearts - for there we will always find evil - and look instead to our Savior. He is the one man who could rightly substitute his name for the word *love* in our text and have it read as perfectly true and accurate. But then the natural question is: *Why would God condemn such a man – the one example in all of human history of perfect love?* Jesus was condemned not because he was perfect, but because we were imperfect. On him was placed the sum total of all *our* sins. God made him to be sin for us, and he now sees the perfection of his Son in you and me, because of the faith worked in our hearts. Jesus got all of our lovelessness; we got all of his perfect loving obedience. The ultimate trade - life for death; perfection for sin; love for hatred. Our sins – every single one of them – have been forgiven.

As with every other good thing, this sort of love is not something you yourself can supply. Pray instead that God – the giver of all good gifts - would increase this divine gift in you. You have it; you just need more. All other gifts will pass away. Only three will remain: faith, hope, and love. The greatest is love. Why? Faith will remain until the end of time, but it will then be replaced with an eternity of what we can *see with our eyes*. Hope will remain until the Day of Judgment, but it will then give way to the *realization* of the bliss of heaven – the active enjoyment of what we once could only look forward to. Only love will remain unchanged into eternity.

This is the gift our Lord offers us here and now, along with faith and hope. This is the gift that he himself describes as the greatest of all attributes. Pray God

not only that he would increase this miracle in your heart, but that he would also, along with this gift, grant you also a greater appreciation of its incredible value. Amen.

Scripture Readings

ESV **Jeremiah 1:4-10** Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." ⁶ Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." ⁷ But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD." ⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

ESV **Luke 4:31-44** And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, ³² and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority. ³³ And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴ "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God." ³⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. ³⁶ And they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!" ³⁷ And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region. ³⁸ ¶ And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. ³⁹ And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them. ⁴⁰ ¶ Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. ⁴¹ And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ. ⁴² ¶ And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, ⁴³ but he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose." ⁴⁴ And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

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The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – February 3, 2019

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 117 (Red Hymnal)

"The Ancient Law Departs"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson (Jeremiah 1:4-10) Our Old Testament lesson not only proves that life begins at conception, it testifies to how sinful it is in God's eyes to terminate the life that he has created. We are also reminded of our calling as God's messengers. The good news is that we don't have to come up with clever, persuasive arguments to carry out our work. God himself has given us the message we are to share with the precious souls that he himself has created.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 51 (Page 31)

The Second Lesson: (Luke 4:31-44) Jesus performed miracles not to entertain or impress but to offer tangible proof of the power and efficacy of his words. The danger, of course, was that the crowds sought him for temporal gifts when they should have been seeking the far greater spiritual gifts he offered. Still today we need to learn this lesson for ourselves. Jesus came to seek and to save.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15 (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 434 (Red Hymnal)

"O God of Jacob, by Whose Hand"

The Sermon – Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

"Love Is the Greatest. Why?"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 351 (Stanzas 1-3) (Red Hymnal)

"Love Divine, All Love Excelling"

The Prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 351 (Stanza 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Love Divine, All Love Excelling"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (26) Average (38)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee hour
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service w/ Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee hour

CLC News – Pastor Rich Kanzenbach is considering the call to Bethel of Morris, MN. Trinity of Spokane has applied for a seminary graduate. Teacher Paul Tiefel is considering calls both to St John's of Okabena and Faith of Markesan. Pastor John Johannes of St. Paul's of Ponsford has announced his resignation from the pastoral ministry for health reasons. Pastor Terry Stringer of the Independent Lutheran Diocese has requested to be considered for colloquy into the ministerium of the CLC. Immediately upon returning to India, Missionary Peter Evensen's visa was revoked, necessitating his return to the US.

Church Council Meeting and Care Package Assembly – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour. During that time, volunteers will also assemble care packages.

Time Out – The maiden voyage of our Time Out program was this past Friday. All who could attend had a great time, both young and old. The plan is to meet from 6-9pm on the first Friday of every month. For more information, please see Outreach Committee Chairman Phil Pfennig.

CLC Women's Retreat – There is an information poster in the fellowship hall (on the bulletin board near the thermostat) for this year's CLC Women's Retreat. For additional information, consult the online sources referenced on that poster.