

1 Corinthians 13:1-8a (NIV)

¹ 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. 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. ⁸ Love never fails.

At the beginning of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul gives thanks for the grace that had been given to them in Christ Jesus. God had called them into fellowship with his Son and enriched them with knowledge.

He can say this about them: You do not lack any spiritual gift.

As we read on, however, we see that there were problems in the congregation. There were factions and divisions. There was boasting and quarreling. There was selfishness and pride. And more.

These are problems that Satan loves to introduce into congregations and families. They are familiar.

As we come to the beginning of chapter 13, we see that Paul is compelled to address the problems that were connected to their spiritual gifts. God had given them these spiritual gifts to serve the needs of his people. They saw things like the ability to speak in tongues as a mark of individual superiority and reason for pride. What Paul saw was a failure of love. Or better an absence of love. Because love, as he so beautifully describes it, never fails. He approaches this problem with an optimistic attitude.

Love Never Fails!

Take note of how he addresses the misuse of spiritual gifts among them.

There's a choice we make all the time when we are speaking to others. It's a decision that pastors make when writing sermons. Do we start with "I" or "you" or "we"? Starting with "if," all of these options are available to him. But it is significant that he begins with the first person singular, "If I..."

If he had begun with "if you," his words would have been equally true, but much more pointed.

- If you speak in tongues, but don't have love, you are nothing but a noisy distraction.
- If you have great knowledge to share or even a faith that is able to move mountains, but don't have love, you are nothing.
- If you sacrifice everything, so that you can boast, you gain nothing.

You are nothing! You gain nothing!

When someone speaks to us like that, we almost automatically go on the defensive. We feel like we are under attack and begin thinking about how we will defend ourselves. We stop listening. At times the easiest escape is the thought, "I know exactly which people he's talking about."

"If I..." doesn't do that. Paul is not demanding a confession. It's more like he is making one. He's saying, "This would be true of me even as an Apostle of the Lord. I would be nothing/gain nothing."

Does it surprise you at all that Paul raises this possibility regarding himself? There will be an echo of this same confession in his second letter to them. **To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh.** If I fall into pride, if I turn gifts meant to serve others into something to show how important I must be, then I am in fact nothing. I gain nothing.

That's because the presence of love makes all the difference. If love is absent, that equals failure. But love never fails.

I will become perfectly clear that this absolutely essential love he is talking about is not a love of warm feelings and empty words. This love is not a love that takes or receives. We could talk on and on for hours about the things that we love without getting to this all important love.

If I were to go on talking about all the foods I love, the places I love, the music, the movies, the sports teams, and even the people I love, I might think that shows I must be a loving person. But all of those examples of love can be examples of receiving or enjoying.

He only becomes something when his love is a matter of giving.

He doesn't define love so much as he describes it. Can you spend any time alone with these words and not have them awaken in you this longing? "Oh, to be loved with such a love!"

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.

I suggest you spend some time with this list of 9 characteristics of love before you. I'm not going to cut it up into 9 pieces to explain each one to you. It just feels like this description gains beauty and power from its repetition and its flow. This love is like a diamond with many facets, with something beautiful to be seen from every angle. Leave one out and you pull others out along with it.

Yet, linger over the ones that are most precious to you. Perhaps this

- **Love is not self-seeking**, claiming to give but really interested in taking.
- **...is not easily angered,**
- **Love keeps no record of wrongs.**

The list of what love doesn't do ends with, **Love does not delight in evil** and continue with a description of what love does. **Love rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails.**

These words have the power to "wound from behind," drawing us in with their beauty and leading to the recognition this doesn't describe me. If these attitudes and actions are missing in my life, then I am nothing and gain nothing.

These words have the power to "heal from behind," when we make the connection. This perfectly describes my Savior. Jesus is all this and more. This heals in two ways:

- In his perfect life of love, Jesus is my Substitute and Savior, my righteousness. His perfect love is credited to me.
- This perfect love describes the Savior who lives and reigns for me. His love never fails.

Take these words home with you. The place where you live may be characterized all too often with impatience and unkindness, quarreling and boasting, selfishness and pride. By patterns of accusing and fighting back that seem unbreakable.

Take these words home with you and, if you must speak, speak with the perspective of Paul. Speak first to yourself. If I hold to this, I don't gain anything. But don't stay there/stop there! Jesus' strong love is the power to change you and me and the places we live.

If I stop my impatience and speak with kindness...

If I set aside the pride that expects to be served and words that wound...

If I set aside the selfish motivations, fearful acts to protect myself, but instead look to protect others...

That will change things. Not instantly or overnight, but as an ongoing force for change. Things will change.

How do we know this? This kind of love is a reflection of the love of Christ, and his love... never fails!