

"The Greatest Is Love" 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 foul 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 comes into play. 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 confront us during our time of grace on earth. Our text is found recorded in the First Letter to the Corinthians, the Thirteenth Chapter:

NKJ **1 Corinthians 13:1-13** *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ² And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and*

though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. ⁴ Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; ⁵ does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; ⁶ does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰ But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. ¹³ And now abide faith, hope, love, 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 through Your Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"** Amen.

Dear Fellow Slaves, 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. 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 had that effect on me – 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 celebrate for an eternity with our Lord 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*.

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 suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails."**

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: **"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me 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 we 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 do not **"suffer long... practice kindness... rejoice in the truth, bear all things, hope all things, believe all things."** In fact the negative list usually describes us better. We **"envy, parade ourselves, 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 perfectly true. Why would God condemn such a man? Jesus was condemned not because he was perfect, but because 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. 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.

Finally, Dear Christian, do not imagine that this sort of love is something you yourself can supply. Pray that God would supply you with this divine gift. 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 by 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. Only love will remain unchanged into eternity.

This is the gift our Lord offers us here and now – the gift that he himself describes as the greatest of all attributes. Pray God that he would grant you also this great treasure in fullest measure. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{NKJ} **Jeremiah 1:4-10** Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: ⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations." ⁶ Then said I: "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth." ⁷ But the LORD said to me: "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' For you shall go to all to whom I send you, And whatever I command you, you shall speak. ⁸ Do not be afraid of their faces, For I am with you to deliver you," says the LORD. ⁹ Then the LORD put forth 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 this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, To root out and to pull down, To destroy and to throw down, To build and to plant."

^{NKJ} **Luke 4:31-44** Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths. ³² And they were astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority. ³³ Now in the synagogue there was a man who had a spirit of an unclean demon. And he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴ saying, "Let *us* alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are -- the Holy One of God!" ³⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him in *their* midst, it came out of him and did not hurt him. ³⁶ Then they were all amazed and spoke among themselves, saying, "What a word this *is!* For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out." ³⁷ And the report about Him went out into every place in the surrounding region. ³⁸ ¶ Now He arose from the synagogue and entered Simon's house. But Simon's wife's mother was sick with a high fever, and they made request of Him concerning her. ³⁹ So He stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. And immediately she arose and served them. ⁴⁰ ¶ When the sun was setting, all those who had any that 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 out and saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of God!" And He, rebuking *them*, did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ. ⁴² ¶ Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; ⁴³ but He said to them, "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent." ⁴⁴ And He was preaching in the synagogues of Galilee.

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The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – January 31, 2010

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 Old Testament Lesson: (Jeremiah 1:4-10) Our Old Testament lesson removes any doubt that life begins at conception. 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.

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

The New Testament 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 -#760- (Verses 1-3) (Brown Hymnal)

"Oh Love How Deep"

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

"The Greatest Is Love"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn -#351- (Red Hymnal)

"Love Divine, All Love Excelling"

The Offering

The Prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn -#206- (Verses 1, 9-10) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Christ, My Sure Defense"

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 - Last Sunday (52) 2010 Average (52)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Adult Bible Study
Next Sunday	-8:45 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor David Fuerstenau is considering the call to Fairchild, WI; Pastor Eric Libby is considering the calls to Sleepy Eye and New Ulm, MN; Pastor David Naumann is considering the calls to Clarkston, WA and Orofino, ID.

Women's Fellowship Notice – On February 7 the ladies are putting together care packages for Emily Baker (who is at ILC) and Tom Ollenburger (who is deployed overseas). Please consult the card in your mailbox for further information, or see Cindy Ollenburger.

Our Newest Member! – Thanks be to God for delivering a healthy baby girl to Josh and Sara Handyside. Madeleine Glora Handyside was born on Saturday evening. God is good!

Copy Machine – Offerings from the congregation, including memorials for Les Weiss, have enabled us to purchase the new copy machine without the need to take out a loan. Thanks to those who contributed, as well as those who volunteered to lend money if needed.

The Lutheran Spokesman – The congregation purchases extra copies of the Lutheran Spokesman each month. Please help yourself to a copy if you are interested, and let the Pastor know if you would like regular monthly copies mailed to your home address. Members are also encouraged to drop one of these extra copies off with a friend or family member, your place of business, etc.