

American Decency Association

PO Box 202, Fremont MI 49412 231-924-4050 www.americandecency.org
Encouraging Christians to guard their heart September 2021

The Proper Place of Love

By: Dr. R.C. Sproul



How many people do you know that have made it to the hall of fame in music, art, literature, or sports because of their love? We elevate people to the status of heroes because of their gifts, their talents, and their power, but not because of their love. Yet, from God's perspective, love is the chief of all virtues. But what is love?

Love is said to make the world go round, and romantic love certainly makes the culture go round in terms of advertising and entertainment. We never seem to tire of stories that focus on romance. But we're not referring to romantic love when we speak of the Christian virtue of love. We're talking about a much deeper dimension of love, a virtue so paramount that it is to distin-

guish Christians from all other people. Moreover, love is so important to the Bible's teachings that John tells us, "God is love" (1 John 4:7-8). Whatever else we say about the Christian virtue of love, we must be clear that the love God commands is a love that imitates His own. The love of God is utterly perfect. And we are called to reflect and mirror that love to perfection, to be perfect as He is perfect (Matt. 5:48). Now, of course, none of us loves perfectly, which is why we must be covered with the perfect righteousness of Christ by faith in Him alone. Nevertheless, it's important for us to return time and again to Scripture to find out what love is supposed to look like, for we're so easily satisfied with a sentimental, maudlin, romantic, or superficial understanding of love.

First Corinthians 13 plumbs the depths of what love really means. It's a measuring rod by which we can examine ourselves carefully to see

whether this love resides in our hearts and is manifested in our lives. Given that truth, I'm surprised that 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most popular passages in all of Scripture instead of being one of the most despised. I can't think of any chapter in Scripture that more quickly reveals our sins than this chapter. It's popularity may be due to its being one of the most misunderstood and least applied chapters in the Bible. There's a sense in which we're ambivalent toward it. We're drawn to it because of the grandeur of its theme and the eloquence of its language, yet at the same time we're repulsed by this chapter because it reveals our shortcomings. We want to keep some safe distance from it because it so clearly demonstrates to us our lack of real love.

This chapter is part of an Apostolic admonition to Christians who were torn apart by contentions in the church. They were behaving in an immature, fleshly manner, and at the heart of this ungodly be-

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havior was a manifestation of certain talents, abilities, and gifts without the presence of love in their lives. In the opening verses, Paul speaks of love as the sine qua non of Christian virtue (1 Cor. 13:1–3). He’s speaking with hyperbole, intentionally exaggerating things to make his point. He starts off comparing love to the gift of tongues. Paul says, in effect, “I don’t care if you are fluent in fifty languages or if you have the gift to speak foreign languages miraculously. I don’t care if God has endowed you with the ability to speak the language of the heavenly host. If you don’t have love, the eloquence of your speech becomes noise. It becomes dissonance, an irritating and annoying racket.” He says here that if we speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, we become a sounding brass or a clanging symbol—mere noise. All the beauty of speech is lost when love

Paul then compares love to the gifts of prophecy and understanding, miraculous endowments that God gave to people during the Apostolic era. These tremendous gifts were nothing compared to love. The Apostle says that you can have a miraculous endowment, you can receive power from God the Holy Spirit, but it is to be used in the context of the grace of love. And without that love, the use of the divine power is a charade. Jesus had to warn even His own disciples about the danger of using a God-given gift without love. Jesus empowered His disciples to participate in His ministry of exorcism, and they went out on their mission and came back clicking their heels. They were so excited at the effectiveness of their ministry that they were rejoicing in the power Christ had given them. But what did Jesus say? Don’t rejoice because you have been given power over Satan, but rejoice that your names have been written in heaven (Luke 10:1–20). The disciples were caught up with the power instead of the grace that

was underlying that power. They were intoxicated with the gift, and were forgetting the One who gave it.

The bottom line is that the gifts of God can be used without love. When that happens, their value is destroyed. The essence of love, 1 Corinthians 13 tells us, is to seek the welfare of others. A person who reflects God’s love is driven to give of himself for others, not to wield his power for his own benefit. But we are people who are more interested in power, in doing rather than being. We’re more concerned to seize the supernatural power that God can give rather than the supernatural love that is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). We have misplaced priorities. Thanks be to God that His love for us is greater than our love for Him. May He strengthen us to pursue love above all else, a love that reflects His love for us in Christ (5:8).

[Taken from *TableTalk* August 2015]



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