

Throw the Book at Us (1Cor 13:1-13)
ZCC 6/08/13

1 If I speak with the languages of men and of angels, but don't have love, I have become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but don't have love, I am nothing. 3 If I dole out all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but don't have love, it profits me nothing. 4 Love is patient and is kind; love doesn't envy. Love doesn't brag, is not proud, 5 doesn't behave itself inappropriately, doesn't seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; 6 doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will be done away with. Where there are various languages, they will cease. Where there is knowledge, it will be done away with. 9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; 10 but when that which is complete has come, then that which is partial will be done away with. 11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become a man, I have 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 will know fully, even as I was also fully known. 13 But now faith, hope, and love remain—these three. The greatest of these is love. (World English Bible)

You are probably familiar with the term “throw the book at him...”. As I thought about this message, that term kept coming to mind. When it pertains to crime and criminals, it seems to refer to the way laws are compiled. You would use “the book” to find the specific law broken--going to the place in the book where the specific law can be found. If a person is charged with breaking many laws and statutes—we say that we, “might as well throw the book at him...”.

Y'all will learn over time that I love cartoons and even old movies. I use them talk about life sometimes. Of course, “throwing the book at you...” isn't usually taken literally--except maybe in cartoons or in the Three Stooges. I CAN tell you one thing—if Moe Howard or Bugs Bunny say they are going to throw the book at you, you'd better duck.

I didn't look up statistics, but trouble in marriage and families seems to be getting worse instead of better—in America, but also in the rest of the world. I also know that our personal relationships need work. For instance, statistically speaking, if you are a victim of a violent crime, the perpetrator will probably be someone you know.

In spite of our relationship to God, even Christians don't seem to be able to get along. Churches, denominations, and individual Christians---seems we have fight after fight.

I'm not going to talk about specific circumstances—personal or otherwise. Some things are beyond our control—be they personal or denominational or whatever. Sometimes we do right and sometimes we do wrong. Sometimes things go wrong even when we do right, so I'm not going to point any fingers.

Instead of specific circumstances, let's think about principle. The big question is, “how are we doing with the basics?”

When relational troubles come (and they will), can we honestly say we are trying to use God's word to guide us? Are we making use of the truths he has made available?

For most of us, the answer is “no.” My own bookshelf is full of relationship books. There are books on

relationships between children and parents, husbands and wives, pastors and churches, and on and on. My point today is that in the little passage I just read—in these 13 verses—there is a powerful tool to keep our relationships healthy. Instead of going to the self-help section of the bookstore and buying a book about this thick with big words and complicated principles, we might do well to try applying what we find here.

I am convinced that we can find ways to live and ways to be and things to do in this book that surpass all the advice in all the Dear Abby columns ever written and on all the Dr. Phil shows and even in all the books in the library. All too often, even as God's people, we fail to do that—we are guilty of ignoring the wonderful principles God has provided—especially when it comes to love.

I'm not sure what the problem is. Maybe we don't read it enough. Maybe we think it is archaic and out of date. Maybe we don't like what we find there.

But I DO know that most of us are guilty of ignoring God's word and his principles when it comes to our lives and especially our relationships. I'm afraid that you and I are guilty and I'm afraid that someone needs to throw this book at us!

All that said, let's begin our passage at the beginning—at Paul's commendation of love. We are probably aware that love and the fruits of love are important. But we can read what Paul said and find out how important love is by looking at those things that are over-shadowed by love. According to Paul, each of these things are “nothing” or even less than nothing outside of love.

In verse 1--Paul is referring back to chapter 12 and speaking in tongues. What he is telling us is that not only is love greater than the spiritual gift of tongues—it is greater than speaking in all human languages—it is even greater than speaking with the voices of angels.

The cymbal mentioned is the “high” cymbal or the loudest cymbal in Jewish celebrations. It is said that this instrument could be heard from Jerusalem—all the way to Jericho. Paul's point seems to be that without love—these seemingly spiritual things are just noise and worthless chatter.

In verse 2, Paul continues with his discussion of the uselessness of things often considered spiritual—if they are outside the boundaries of love. These are great spiritual gifts—prophesy, and knowledge--of spiritual mysteries and natural mysteries, and faith—faith great enough to cast down mountains. Aren't these important?

We hold up those who have a word from God—we revere those who can help us see the truth in God's word--those who know His mysteries. We love the wise and we love wisdom.

And oh, don't we love those of great faith? Those who can pray powerful prayers and get answers. Those who seem to know the mind and heart of God. Those who stand up in times of difficulty instead of falling. Here Paul says that faith which is so great that we can cast down mountains—or tell them to move—is nothing outside of love.

Other things we hold highly—these too, Paul addresses. Benevolence—self denial for the sake of others. Paul's point is that if giving to the poor is good—then giving up everything for the sake of others must be better—and even that is nothing unless bathed in love.

The next one might surprise you—it did me. I’ve been reading this for years, but still it shocked me when I read it slowly. [Read verse 3b]

One of the quickest ways to get “saint” status is to give one’s life for the church and for God. But Paul says that even if I give myself to be martyred—to be burned at the stake—that action is less important than love. Does that shock you?

I think it should—we have newsletters and booklets and news articles on Christian persecution. We revere those who have been persecuted or killed for their faith. Yet—love stands above that. Can you imagine an e-mail newsletter or a pamphlet or a television interview or whatever—where someone is being honored for having real and true love?

Yet Paul seems to be saying that these are the really spiritual ones—that these are the real Christians—those who love. Over and above spiritual gifts and wisdom and benevolence and martyrdom, and even faith itself—Paul holds up love. Of course, true love will spawn these—but love has to come first. Without that—these can just be legalistic activities—boxes to check on your get-into-heaven-free card.

Now, quickly, let’s read Paul’s description and see if it can also be a prescription for family love—both in your physical family and our church family. [Read 1Cor 13:-4-8a]

When I do a wedding, I ALWAYS suggest this passage be read. I know it has been used and used and used for weddings, but I also believe that’s for good reason. If we ask God for these and if we apply them with all our being and with his strength—REALLY apply them--we will have few, if any relationship troubles.

Love is patient—it suffereth long the KJV says--and I know, especially in some relationships, the word “suffer“ surely applies (Now don’t any of you turn and look at anyone else.) :)

Real love is slow to anger. Slow to resent. Not given to revenge. Can you see where this could apply to church, denomination, Christianity, or marriage/family? How often does a quick word ruin the future?

Love is kind—gentle, courteous. Love takes into account the needs and capacities of others. Love does not expect more than others can give. Kind means to do good and mean good things for all—seeking what is best for them. Kindness—if we deal with others from this point—how can we go wrong? Kind words, kind deeds, kindness instead of meanness.

Love does not envy—is not jealous of others, of what they have or know or who they are. This can be prosperity, talents, wives or husbands, it can be honor, it can be leadership—whatever it is, love does not envy it. Love does not boast---it is not haughty or proud. How much of our trouble—as churches, as Christians and as families come from breaking this principle? Oh, what a place to fall to our knees—folks, all too often we are guilty as individuals. We are guilty as churches. We are guilty as a denominations. We are guilty of haughtiness and pride.

Look on further—to indecent behavior and self-gratification [Verse 5]. Are we a nation of these things or not? If we have God’s love in us and if we let it come out, we will not do those things we know to be wrong--we will be decent—not indecent. Again—how much trouble comes from these? Seeking self—in pride.

We want what we want and we want to do what we want, even if it is wrong. How often would everything have turned out fine if at least one person had simply done the right thing? How often do we

get caught up and just want it or just want to do it—no matter what? Again—churches and marriages end over this one.

Also in Verse 5—Love is not easily provoked and thinks no evil. Did you ever just have a blind fit--where something just came over you and you did or said something you shouldn't have in the heat of the moment? Have you ever? Who said “no”?—I want to shake your hand. I've heard it said that we can say more in ten seconds than we can take back in a lifetime.

Connected to that is the last part of verse 5—which can mean that real love thinks no evil. We always tend think the worst—don't we? That isn't real love. That phrase can also mean that love doesn't keep track--doesn't keep bringing up the past. How are you and I doing on that one?

In verse 6, I believe Paul means that with real love we cannot celebrate unrighteousness or evil. He may also mean that we are not even to celebrate bad things--even when they happen to our enemies. Instead of those things, love celebrates the truth of God.

[Read through verse 8a] Real love, love that comes through us from the heart of God NEVER fails. All the other gifts are limited and they will fail and they will be replaced--Paul describes that in the next few verses.

[Read 8b-12] All we do and all we are will perish. All is wood, hay, and stubble. Our righteousness is as rags.

Then in verse 13, we get to the punch line--the meat of this whole chapter. [read 13]

In the end, what will abide is faith, hope, and love--and Paul tells us that love stands alone.

I challenge each of us today to go out of this place with these verses in our hearts and minds and on our tongues. Remember it is THIS kind of love that sent the Son and made a way for you and me to have an eternal, loving relationship with God. It is also the kind of love that will strengthen and even redeem the relationships we have here on this earth.

Invitation--it may be that you would come today during our time of invitation making a profession of faith in this one who lives us so. It may be that you would come to move your membership and join this congregation--working with us as we love each other and love our community with the love that Paul is talking about.