

## **Introduction**

Many of you know I love baseball and I always have, especially as a boy. I'll never forget something that my friends and I used to do. We'd compile our own list of all-stars each year, the players we thought were the best, and then compare them. The list I remember most is the one I compiled for my favorite year in baseball, 1961: RHP - Jim Bunning; LHP - Sandy Koufax; C - Elston Howard; 1B - Norm Cash; 2B - Bobby Richardson; Nellie Fox; SS - Tony Kubek; 3B - Ken Boyer; LF - Yogi Berra; CF - Mickey Mantle; and RF - Roger Maris. You can see I wasn't all that biased. Only six of the ten were Yankees.

Anyway, I want you to suppose something - that God Himself compiled a list of all-stars. I mean a list of the people that He thinks are the best in His kingdom. Question - would you and I be on it? If not, we could be and here's how. It's by being and doing what 1 Corinthians 13 calls us to be and do. If we answer that call, we'll be stars in God's kingdom and that's what I'm going to preach about today and the next few weeks. It's a sermon series from 1 Corinthians 13 titled *Be a Star*.

## **Agape Love**

The theme of chapter 13 is an easy one to identify. It's found in the word that's used 10 times in its 13 verses. The Greek word is "agape" and its English translation is "love." This chapter then is about agape love. The first thing we need to do, therefore, is to define just what that is.

Understanding God's love assists us in doing that. 1 John 4:8,16 reveals one of the most significant truths we know, "**God is love.**" The Greek word translated "love" there and actually everywhere in our English Bibles is "agape." God is agape love.

With that in mind, let me ask you a critical question. Why did He make human beings? A critic of Christianity I know says it's because He's egocentric and needs someone to praise Him. But nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is that He's self-sufficient and needs no

needs no one or no thing. One author says it well. God is **“at home in the land of the Trinity.”** That means that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, have everything they need in each other. Why then did He make human beings? It’s to love and perfect them. He didn’t make them to get from them. He made them to give to them.

C.S. Lewis used a biological metaphor to explain that. Sometimes, one organism lives off of another organism. The organism being lived off of is called the host. The organism living off of the host is called the parasite. Thus, if a tick burrows into your flesh and lives there off your blood, you are a host and it is a parasite. Well, the same thing is true of God and us, Lewis said. He is a host who deliberately creates His own parasites, human beings. Just as the host doesn’t need the parasite, so God doesn’t need us. Just as the host gets no necessary benefit from the parasite, so God gets no necessary benefit from us. And just as the host is used by the parasite, so God is used by us. The bottom line is this. God made us so that we might take advantage of, exploit, and use Him.

That’s agape love and what 1 Corinthians 13 is all about. This chapter calls us to love others in the same kind of way that God loves us. We see from Lewis’ metaphor what that kind of way is. It’s with disinterest. Agape love is disinterested.

First, it’s disinterested in the merit of the person loved. It doesn’t consider whether he or she is worthy of being loved. It loves whether he or she is worthy of it or not. There’s an old axiom that says, **“To be loved; be lovable.”** That axiom rightly describes the posture of most people. They won’t love you unless you’re lovable. But that isn’t the posture of God and those who have agape love. They love even those who are not naturally lovable – the grouchy, the overbearing, the selfish, the vain, and so on.

Agape love is disinterested in a second thing – its own gain. It seeks nothing for itself. As God does, people with agape love make themselves hosts and others parasites. That means they value and seek the good of others over their own good. They purposely choose to be

used for the benefit of others.

I read about a Christian community leader at whose retail store a gay rights group was picketing. They were upset by the public stand he took against extending the legal rights of married couples to gay couples. It was a very cold day and this Christian, as a result, made and took out hot cups of coffee and hot chocolate to the protesters. When asked why, he replied, **"They looked cold and I wanted them to be comfortable."** That is God's kind of love, agape, and that Christian has it.

### **Four Gifts and Two Deeds**

But do you have it? And do I? The fact is we may not. That's one of two insights that Paul gives us in verses 1-3. We may not have agape love for others. Let's look now at those verses and that insight. We start with verses 1 and 2, in which Paul mentions four gifts.

The first is speaking **"with the tongues of men and of angels."** That phrase probably refers to the spiritual gift of tongues. It's broad enough though to include any kind of eloquent discourse. Dennis Kinlaw and Tony Campolo, for instance, do what very few speakers do - excel not only in delivery but content as well.

Paul mentions a second gift, **"the gift of prophecy."** That is a spectacular gift, superior to tongues, according to 1 Corinthians 14:5. God gives the gifted person a special message. He or she then speaks that message to the intended individual or group.

The third gift is comprehending **"all mysteries and knowledge."** That phrase probably refers to the spiritual gift of knowledge. God reveals an insight or fact to the gifted person about some individual or thing. The phrase is broad enough though to encompass knowledge in the normal sense, insights and facts learned through study and thought. That's the kind of knowledge that C.S. Lewis had.

There's a fourth gift Paul mentions, having **"all faith."** That refers not to saving faith or sanctifying faith but to mountain moving faith. It's the confidence to believe God for great things. That's the kind of faith

that George Mueller had.

Paul mentions those four gifts for a reason. It's because they're the ones that Christians probably admire and desire the most.

Having mentioned four gifts in verses 1-2, Paul goes on to mention two deeds in verse 3. The first is giving all of our possessions to feed the poor. The second is giving our body to be burned. That refers to being killed for the sake of God and His kingdom. Paul mentions those particular deeds for a reason. They're the ones that Christians think are the most heroic. We hold anyone who does either in the highest regard.

Those then are four gifts and two deeds that Paul mentions in verses 1-3. Now let's look at one of the two insights he gives us about them.

### **We Can Be Gifted and Giving but Not Have Agape Love**

Notice a little formula he uses with regard to those gifts and deeds, **"If I . . . , but do not have love."** If I speak in tongues, prophesy, have knowledge, exercise mountain moving faith, give everything I have to the poor, or am martyred for God . . . **but do not have love.** That formula clearly implies this. We can be gifted and giving but not have agape love. That's the insight and it's a startling one to most of us.

Let's take a little survey here. I'm going to name a person and then ask you a question about him or her. Please answer each question to yourself. Billy Graham. Does he have agape love? Oswald Chambers. Did he have agape love? Mother Teresa. Did she have agape love? Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Did he have agape love?

Most Christians would answer "yes" to all of those. They would because of an unspoken assumption they've picked up along the way. If a person is gifted or giving, then he or she must be loving as well. The individuals I named were either gifted or giving. And because they were, most Christians assume, they were loving as well.

But that assumption is wrong. The right answer to each of the questions I asked is "I don't know." Paul's formula shows us that. Billy Graham, whose eloquence is unsurpassed, might not have agape love.

Oswald Chambers, whose knowledge and insight were stunning, might not have had agape love. Mother Teresa, whose giving to the poor was historic, might not have had agape love. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was the most acclaimed Christian martyr of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, might not have had agape love. I'm not saying that they didn't have. I'm just saying we don't know because they might not have had.

Paul's insight is that being gifted and giving doesn't mean we have agape love. And if that's true, it's also true that being a Christian leader doesn't mean we have agape love. Or being a long established Christian doesn't mean we have agape love. I'm a pastor and have been a Christian for over 50 years. That doesn't mean I have agape love.

### Examine Ourselves

That's a profound insight and its implication to us is clear. We need to examine ourselves to determine this. Do I have agape love for others?

In his book *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard makes a confession that I want to you to hear in his own words: **"Sometime ago I came to realize that I did not love the people next door. They were, by any standards, dangerous and unpleasant people – ex-bikers who made their living selling drugs. As I brooded over them one day, indulging my irritation, the Lord helped me see that I really had no love for them at all, that after 'suffering' from them for several years I would be secretly happy if they died so that we could just be rid of them. I realized how little I truly cared for nearly all the people I dealt with through the day, even when on 'religious business.'"**

Wow, that's a candid confession. It illustrates what all of us who are serious about following Jesus need to do. We need to purposely, thoughtfully, and objectively examine ourselves to determine this. Do I have agape love for the people that I deal with every day. That's what we need to do and here's how we do it.

First, we learn how agape love manifests itself. As I'll explain next

week, it's a condition or state of being. And as such, it manifests itself in specific and practical ways, 15 of which Paul reveals in verses 4-7. So, we learn what those ways are. You don't have to do that on your own. I will, in this sermon series, explain each of the 15 ways to you in detail. All you have to do, therefore, is come, listen, and learn.

Second, we stack ourselves up against how love manifests itself. As you'll see, the 15 ways that it manifests itself entail certain attitudes, inclinations, and reactions. So, we get alone with God and compare our attitudes, inclinations, and reactions to those. We prayerfully ask and answer this question, "How does how I think, feel, and react measure up to how agape love thinks, feels, and reacts?"

Some years ago, after studying 1 Corinthians 13, I did what I just explained. I got alone with God and stacked myself up against how agape love manifests itself. Verse 7, for instance, says that it endures all things. That means it joyfully puts up with everything imaginable from others. But I didn't. I either didn't put up with things from others or I put up with them, but inwardly grumbling as I did. You know the old aphorism, "Weighed, measured, and found wanting." That was the outcome when I stacked myself up against how agape love manifests itself. Willard's confession, in other words, was mine as well.

That then is the first insight Paul gives us in verses 1-3 and its implication to us. We can be gifted, giving, leading, or long established Christians, admired by everyone, but not have agape love for others. We need to examine ourselves, therefore, to determine if we do or don't.

## **Conclusion**

I close with the words of Thomas Merton: **"Love's joy is the good of the beloved. Consequently, if my love be pure I do not even have to seek for myself the satisfaction of loving. Love seeks one thing only: the good of the one loved."** Do you and I have that kind of host love for others? As we've seen today, we may not. But we need to and can and that's what I'm going to preach about next week.