

Title: What if, it's all talk?

Text: 1 Cor 13.1

Theme: All talk but no love

Series: 1 Corinthians #65

Prop Stmt All talk and no love is a mockery of the gospel.

When I ask you to open your bibles to 1 Corinthians, do you imagine the original audience in Corinth who received this letter from Paul? Do you see this group of people, some whom are richly dressed, others very common in appearance, who have gathered in a large home? Many of these people have dull, mundane lives with difficult marriages, challenging children, and harsh living conditions. Some of them struggle with personal illness and relational problems. The initial excitement of coming to faith in Christ has been replaced by the ongoing challenges of living authentic lives with other believers in the midst of a world that is hostile to grace.

Go back to 1.2 – To the church of God in Corinth,
 To those sanctified in Christ Jesus
 And called to be holy, together with all...

This is a group of people who live in the world – Corinth to be exact, whose lives (individually and now corporately as a group) have been changed by God. They have been set apart by and in Christ Jesus and as a people they have been called to be part of a family, called a church and this church is part of the family of God that all over the world is supposed to be living now as a taste of what life is going to be like when Christ returns.

Sometimes, we do not think like we should when we open the Bible, especially certain parts. I think this is particularly true with 1 Cor. 13. This chapter is the hallmark card of the Bible – isn't it? When you open your Bible to this chapter, it is as if Pachelbel's Canon in D immediately starts to play, and soft ocean waves begin to lazily, yet happily and serenely cast themselves gently upon the sand, all the while the evening's still, quiet whisper is accented with the calling of birds. That may be what you are thinking when you read this, but that is not what the Apostle Paul was thinking! In fact, there is a quite a bit many of us need to re-think about this text.

It is easy to assume that we huddle in here on Sunday to get ourselves looking good and make our programs really cool, so that we can be an attractive facility and program for the world. In other words, we need to work on ourselves and then we will engage the world. The truth is, we already engage our world. Like the believers who lived in Corinth, we live in this world. If you are a genuine follower of Christ then through you, God has already invaded your world, but, the way you are living may not be a very accurate reflection of the message that God wants you to communicate. That is discouraging. How can my family be a witness for the gospel when we can't even have a conversation without yelling at each other? How can I talk to my neighbor about Christ when I can't even talk to my 15 year old daughter without her rolling her eyes and walking away?

That is what I love about the Scriptures! This is not theoretical stuff, this is truth, written by a man who lived with his audience and knows them well. But, what he wrote was ultimately directed by God who knew their and our greatest need. Life is not an act that we put on. Our lives are already preaching sermons, even if we don't think we are ready to stand behind a pulpit and do it. We are telling our family and everyone else in our lives what we really think about Christ and his gospel by the way in which we live. What we have found out over and over in our study of this book is that this church at Corinth is in many ways our story. Life is messy. Relationships can be rocky. Forgiveness and interpersonal conflict solving is not easy. But, the gospel, rightfully understood and applied, is incredibly effective, if I am willing to really believe it and live it.

In our study of this NT book, we have learned that the church at Corinth was a mess. And they were fighting and arguing about who has the greatest gifts and is therefore the most spiritual. So, Paul writes, "You want to talk about being spiritual? You think speaking in tongues is some secret means of spiritual growth? You think giving some prophecy makes you hot? I'll talk about what is truly spiritual!" And then, Paul hits them right between the eyes and picks on the gifts that they were elevating as being the greatest as well as being the true evidence of spirituality. The chapter itself has three parts.

- 1-3** – What if? – **The Priority of Love**
- 4-7** – What is? – **The Properties of Love**
- 8-13** – What's next? **The Permanence of Love**

In this first section (verses 1-3) there are five "if clauses" in the original language. (1 in vs.1; 2 in vs. 2 and 2 in vs.3) Therefore, the following five points, follow the five "if clauses." But, this stuff is much more than grammar. These "if clauses" are some pretty big stuff. What Paul is describing in many cases, is a person who by all other accounts would be a rather stupendous individual. (re-read vs. 1-3)

What good would it be:

1. **If I was the greatest public speaker ever, but had no love?** (v.1) Or,
2. **If I had the greatest intellect and had no love?** – 2a

What good would it be:

3. **If I had the greatest faith and had no love?** – 2b

What good would it be:

4. **If I gave away all my stuff to feed the poor and had no love?** – 3a

What good would it be:

5. **If I died in a blaze of glory and had no love?** – 3b

The way God looks at this person is if there is no love, the way God defines love, this person is nothing. Remember our definition of love: **Love is a commitment and uncompromising devotion, rooted in the very character of God Himself, to give of yourself for the benefit of another, even if that person cannot ever give back to you and even if no one else will ever know.** Let's begin with verse 1. What good would it be:

1. If I was the greatest public speaker ever, but had no love? - 1

In order to answer that, we need to know, what Paul meant by:

A. The tongues of men and the tongues of angels.

I am saving a more thorough study on the gift of tongues with you until we get to chapter 14, since that is the territory where Paul deals with it so extensively. What we have seen in our study, is that the Corinthian believers were trying to elevate the gift of tongues beyond the other gifts, an issue that Paul absolutely decries in chapter 12 and in so doing, they had not only given the gift a status that it was never intended to have, but they also gave it a function that it never had either. Apparently to some, the gift of tongues was a heavenly angel language.

What Paul is doing here is, he is using their view as a hypothetical argument. “Look, even if I could speak in all of the languages of the world.” Whoa! Hold the phone. How many of you have learned a foreign language? People, who are conversant in different languages are impressive aren’t they? Translators are powerful people; they control the flow and the content of information.

I heard John MacArthur say, that he was invited to go and preach in some Russian churches not long after the fall of communism. He was part of an entourage from the states. In those days, if an American showed up in a Russian church, he was asked to talk. John said, that just before he was supposed to preach an American who also was there was asked to speak. The man began to tell how successful he was, how many houses he had, cars, etc. but that his life had been empty. Then he surrendered to the Lord and God gave him even more money, houses and cars, and that he had married Ms. Texas and now his life was incredible. Poor John is about to die. Many in the audience have next to nothing. Some of them have suffered incredible hardships because of their trust in Christ and to say that this guy is insensitive and myopic doesn’t even begin to describe the situation. Poor John, he is about to die. His mind is scrambling as to what he can do to address this. The translator comes over and sits next to John, while the congregation is singing and John starts to apologize for what has just happened. The translator smiled and said, “Don’t worry, I just preached Christ.”

We are impressed with people who know different languages. People like that can control situations. They have influence and power. They are invited into high level discussions and are entrusted with secrets. In University settings students are awed when a professor knows 5 or more languages especially since so many of us think that diagramming an English sentence is equivalent to cracking the DNA code.

But, what if a person could literally speak in the language(s) of angels? Again, I am not convinced that Paul believes that there is a heavenly language called the Angel Language, especially since, every time the Bible records angels speaking, they are speaking in human languages, but even if they had their own language – what if a person knew it?

Wow! Now, that would be power, provided you had one or two you could communicate with.

B. A resounding gong and a clanging cymbal.

I would be nothing more than a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. What did Paul mean by that? Today, what we call a gong, is not exactly what they had in Corinth, although our cymbal which is more of a Turkish origin is not radically different. A little history and archaeology is of help here. There was an auditorium in Corinth that utilized large brass vases as resonating jars. The hardness of this metal would reflect and therefore serve to amplify sound. These jars were placed all around this auditorium in different niches to help aid in the reverberation of sound. They themselves were lifeless, hollow, empty vessels, but for a while helped make the noise in the auditorium a little louder, until a Roman governor, Lucius Mummius sold them to raise some public funds.

Of the five “if clauses” presented here, this one grabs me by the throat more so than the others, since I have given so much of my life’s attention and energies into the study of the art of public speaking. In one of my speech classes in college, I had a teacher who was a master of articulation. I watched intently how he formed words and shot them like blazing arrows into the last rows of the balcony. Readings would live or die on inflection, pacing and intensity. When in high school I was part of a high school band invited to play at a political event for a man running for the office of president. The man was a terrible speaker. I knew then – he was in trouble. A few years later, when I was in college a presidential contender came and spoke to the student body. His speech was a masterful example of a person who knew his material, and knew his audience. By the end, we were on our feet, thunderously applauding. I was supposed to go to History class after that event, but instead, I waited in line to shake the hand of Ronald Reagan, and then explained when I got into class a little late, that I wanted to shake hands with history that day, not just hear about it. After that speech, I had no doubt that man would be president, he just knew how to communicate.

I tell you all of this because, as much emphasis as we place on speaking – and we do, the Corinthian culture almost worshipped it. The gift of speaking was a huge issue to them, which is one of the reasons why it was such a hot topic in the church. Paul acknowledged in 1.5 that they were very rich in this gift. Some of them were declared followers of Apollos, who was reported to be able to speak rather eloquently. To this day, when you study the art of speaking, most courses will take you back to the ancient greek culture, which is the exact setting of this text. This culture understood the dynamics of speaking so well that their standard remains as the standard today. Three things were important to a speech; logos, ethos and pathos.

Logos refers to the content of what is said. The ideas have to make sense and the word selection needs to be clear and even impressive. Last week, before one NFL game, logos and insight reached an all-time high when one commentator looked into the camera and said, “One team is going to win and another is going to lose.” (Aristotle, he is not.)

Ethos refers to the personal integrity of the person who is doing the communicating. What if Fidel Castro was giving a speech on gastro-intestinal procedures and economics? You get the point.

The third word, pathos refers to the passion, the emotion, the intensity of the person who is speaking. David Hume was a Scottish philosopher and skeptic who one day was on his way to go listen to the great evangelist George Whitfield preach, when someone challenged him and said, "I thought you did not believe in the gospel." Hume said, "I don't, but he does."

Mind-stimulating content; words and concepts from dozens of languages and cultures, backed up by a person's life and experiences that towers over others, who speaks with an intensity that seems to be stoked by a fire in his very soul will produce a speech that will move Parliaments and policies and drive men into armies and armies into battle and battles into wars and wars that change the world. Public speaking changes history – just ask Hitler.

Public speaking can be impressive. We can become so impressed with the people that we listen to, we try to impress other people with the fact that we got to hear them. I heard Piper. I heard MacArthur, I heard Sproul, Mohler, or whatever list you create. But, if I buy all the books, go to all the conferences, listen to all the CD's, and read the blogs, what good is it if I don't love. But it is so easy for us to make excuses. We are no different than the people at Corinth in this sense. We can so easily mistake talent and giftedness with what God says is truly spiritual. But, this is what is actually so humbling and encouraging all at the same time. God couldn't care less if you were great in front of people.

A junior high music teacher had just organized a band in her school. The principal was so proud of the music teacher's efforts that without consulting her he decided that the band should give a concert for the entire school. The music teacher wasn't so sure her young musicians were ready to give a concert, so she tried to talk the principal out of holding the concert, to no avail. Just before the concert was ready to begin, as the music teacher stood on the podium, she leaned forward and whispered to her nervous musicians, "If you're not sure of your part, just pretend to play." And with that, she stepped back, lifted her baton and with a great flourish brought it down. Lo and behold, nothing happened! The band brought forth a resounding silence. Sometimes we in the church are like that junior high band, unsure of our parts, and afraid that we might do something or say something embarrassing in front of people.

Let's say that you are like that; terrified of the thought of saying a word in front of a crowd. Please understand this. God doesn't care if you could speak in all the languages of men or even converse with angels. He cares if you love. You may not be able to stand in front of crowds, but you can minister like the king. Don't sell yourself short and think that just because you don't possess some public talent that the world and even people in the church seem to be impressed with, that your place in the body is unimportant. The MOST EXCELLENT way is love.

On the other hand, let's say that you are good in front of people. That position always comes with a risk – a huge risk. You risk being thought of as irrelevant or (gasp!) boring. Public speaking is a double-edged sword. You risk the rejection of some (if you are not good) and you risk arrogance (if you are good). You also risk the problem of having to be good every time if you happened to be pretty good once. Every time you speak, someone can and usually does find fault. That is exactly why I don't listen to my own sermons. I cannot believe what you poor people have to endure week in and week out. I am so glad that I am not at your dinner tables after church. But there is one thing that you and I can do that will never be out of tune, never boring, never irrelevant nor out of date or redundant. You can love. What good would it be if our church had the greatest public speaker ever and had no love? What good would it be if we had the greatest teachers, the greatest classes, the greatest electives and featured the finest preachers in the country, if we did not have love, we would be nothing more than lifeless, hollow, resonating pieces of brass, or irritatingly noisy cymbals.

There are people all around you who do not “deserve” love. Those people are your calling – this week.