

## VALENTINE VERSES

All of us have been fascinated by the natural talents and abilities of people. Whether it is in music, art, mathematics, physical agility or intellectual prowess, some have been blessed with physical and mental abilities that are outstanding. We can observe people who have worked to perfect their skills and wonder "How do they do that?" These special talents and abilities are part of the spectrum of human capability and operate in the *natural* realm. For those of us who are in Christ, we have superimposed on the natural realm a supernatural reality in which we are endowed with a variety of spiritual gifts. These spiritual abilities are separate from and generally not related to natural talents. The Bible tells us that spiritual gifts are given to the saints to enable them to carry out the work of the ministry that builds up the Church (Eph 4:12).

The context in which talents or gifts find expression greatly influences the effectiveness of these capabilities. We have heard of the "prima donnas" of the theater or the spoiled "super stars" of professional and amateur sports. Typically such people have limited influence beyond the expression of their narrow talent. Many of these fail to find a full and meaningful life. The same concern regarding the context in which natural abilities are expressed applies to spiritual gifts, also. The gifts may operate perfectly but have an imperfect impact if the context in which the ministry is delivered is defective. The more *excellent way* is for every ability to find its expression in the framework of *unselfish love*.

In the midst of Paul's discourse about Spiritual gifts and how these are to operate in the church, he interjected a powerful teaching about the framework in which God's gifts are to operate.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

If life were a sporting event and the Trinity made up the panel of judges, the scoring might be such that the individual scores for each event (action) would be multiplied by a factor that would depend on the intent of our heart. Only "selfless love" would have a factor of **one**. All other intents and attitudes of the heart would get a **zero**. The fact that God gave the gift or spiritual ability does not gain us any points no matter how perfectly we perform if the intents and attitudes of our hearts are wrong. We might be able to preach and teach and prophesy in the most eloquent manner and with exact agreement of what God has revealed; however, if we are doing so simply to draw attention to ourselves rather than love for the people to whom we minister, then we accomplish nothing in God's viewpoint.

It is very difficult for us to determine the motive behind what we do. It is next to impossible to make that assessment for someone else. You would think that giving all of one's possession to the poor or especially becoming a martyr would be motivated totally by unselfish love. This is not necessarily the case. We can imagine a situation in which a person is trying to make a name for himself or is giving his or her money away to spite a family member who might otherwise inherit the money. Only the word of God that is sharper than a two-edged sword is capable of separating the "thoughts and intents of the heart."

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

If unselfish, Godly love is the **only** acceptable basis (motivation) for a Christian's thoughts, words and deeds, then that love will find expression in our what we think, what we say, and what we do. When a person becomes a Christian, this kind of love is put into the essence of our very being (God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit . . .Rom 5:5). This kind of love IS the nature of God. When this love finds expression in us, it is, in a very practical sense, a result of *God being present in us*. For the old nature, love of self comes "naturally." For the new nature (if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature) selfless love comes "supernaturally." As Christians, we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable characteristics. We are no longer able to excuse ourselves with a plea of "I'm only human." Such a confession denies the **new birth** and the indwelling presence of God in us which does NOT dwell in the rest of the world.

Our new “supernatural” behavior (thoughts, words, and deeds) should, in reality, be totally NATURAL for us *as Christians*. In Paul’s list of characteristics (vs. 4-7) we can see a mixture of ways of thinking, ways of expressing ourselves and actions. Unselfish love in the heart of the believer produces patience, kindness, and good will. It causes us to realize that we are nothing apart from Jesus and that our boast is only in Him. Selfless love has no motivation to promote *self*, since *self* died on the cross in Christ. Petty slights and put downs by others do not cause anger since “selfless love” believes the best about others. It causes us to hear criticism as an opportunity for us to grow in the Lord and become more like Christ by putting more and more of self to death as we take up our cross each day. The kind of love that Jesus showed us transforms our ideas about what gives us pleasure and causes us to recognize and to value truth. Just as God is the protector of the helpless and poor, we too will see opportunity to help those who cannot help themselves. Finally, *true Godly love* produces optimism and causes us to press on toward the goal “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil 1:6)

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

I guess when all is said and done, “the bottom line” is all that really matters. To a lot of people “the bottom line” simply means *what it costs*. Instead of thinking about the costs, we need to think of *what will remain* after everything else is taken away. In other words, what are we “betting on” for the future? Where does our focus lie?

As Christians, we should be well removed from having to be convinced that money, material things, power, and fame are not points in which we should put any confidence. Before we became a Christian, bank accounts, investments, insurance, careers, positions and the like were “the important things” or the bottom line issues.

After becoming a Christian, we still need to be careful. It is possible to get caught up in a completely new set of bottom line issues. We could put our focus and confidence in the fact that we have certain spiritual gifts. It may be a great gift, having value to the church, such as *prophecy*. Our gift might be at the other end of the spectrum such as *speaking in an unknown tongue*. It may be that God has given us the *gift of knowledge*. Whatever it is, there will come a time when prophecy will not be needed since we will be fully united with Jesus and not be hindered by the “veil of the flesh.” We will be able to fully communicate with God (Spirit to spirit) and not have a need for *interpretation*. There will be full knowledge for all since we will be in His presence. What will be our focus or our point of confidence then?

At that point, if someone were to raise the question, “How do you know you are doing God’s will?” what would you say? Now we might say, “God gives our church prophetic messages through me.” Some might say, “I speak in unknown tongues.” Others may find their identity and focus in great healing ministries or evangelism and they might say that so many were healed or so many were saved under their ministry. I know people who put their confidence in their giving. While all these are wonderful and great and God can use them, they are limited in scope. They are not “the big picture” issues and they will pass away. So what IS the bottom line? The **only** answer that can be acceptable is “I am in Christ Jesus and He is in me.” This affirmation is an exercise of **Faith** that is based on the **Hope** found in the word of God. However, the evidence of His presence is the essence of His person: God is **Love**. This is foundational.

God is eternal. He is permanent. If we are in Him, then we, too, are eternal. That is really is the **heart** of the matter.