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Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke  
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Series: What Matters Most - #1

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NIV:

**13** If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. **2** 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 do not have love, I am nothing. **3** If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

They tell me that -- psychologists and sociologists and everybody else -- that, on the average, each of us will make somewhere in the vicinity of about 2,500 decisions on a given day. I'm unaware of most of the ones I make. I just gotta live -- you know, it's like -- I never -- very infrequently do I pause and slow down and kinda think about some of the decisions. You know, I mean, of course it's green and we're gonna go, red it's gonna stop. I guess I made a decision to stop. But I don't consciously think about that. But if I do make that many, and let's just presume for a moment that you and I do make that many, the reality is, there's a whole lot of things that are going on, if you will, a grid in my life, that helps me shape those decisions. There are things that influence the way I make those decisions. Kind of like a rudder on a ship -- below the water -- you see that boat turning, but you don't, you know, you realize because you know what's going on that underneath there's a rudder that's turning, and for you and I, when we make these decisions, some of them are terribly mundane. You know, what are you gonna have when you go home tonight -- ice cream, or ice cream with chocolate? Which one? Or, for those of you who are dieting, celery. Celery with peanut butter or celery with cream cheese. I mean, you gotta have something other than celery. I'm not sure it's legal to eat celery alone. But you're going to make a decision. Some of them are mundane.

Others -- I know of a brother who's thinking about -- not here, he lives in another state -- do I stay with my wife or not? It's a big decision, it's not a mundane decision. I've got another friend who's struggling in his family. There's division, and he's trying to figure out -- half of the kids are talking to him, half the kids are not. Does he reach out to them? Does he pursue them? There are things that are influencing those decisions for him, but he's making those decisions this week. They're going to be huge decisions. There's other decisions of people in our church that I know that are preparing to meet Jesus in Heaven. And there are folks that are sitting with them, and they're making decisions -- what are the last things I share? What are the things that I say to this person? Huge decisions. And some of them are mundane, some of them are critical. And with every one of those decisions, you have things that shape you in terms of what you say, how do say it, etc. Some of you are really busy. Your life has never been so busy. I was talking with somebody the other day, she's in the food industry, and she said -- "Let me tell you what -- I don't know what all is slowing down in the world, my industry is not." She goes, "I've never been so busy." She's kind of like the guy who was standing at the edge of the Atlantic one day, and he was dipping water out of the Atlantic, and he was putting it down at his feet, and he goes, "I see the puddle at my feet, but I feel like my life is not making any difference. I keep dipping, I look at the puddle, but I look out at the Atlantic and it doesn't seem to change." And that's the way your life is. You just kind of go and go and go, and you've got all kinds of decisions you're making.

And so, I want to look at a passage that helps us. It centers us. And in fact, it says that in life, in the decisions that we make, the things that we pick up, the issues that we face, the issues that we pick up to debate, there is something that supersedes all of them. It's a way of living. It's a life of love. This passage that we're looking at, 1 Corinthians chapter 13, is probably famous for how many weddings it has been read in. The funny thing -- and those of you who know the context of this -- it has nothing to do with a

wedding. You know where chapter 13 lands in the Bible, in 1 Corinthians? Between chapters 12 and 14. I know that's a terribly insightful observation, isn't it? What's chapter 11 about in 1 Corinthians? People dying because they don't know how to take communion correctly. Chapter 12, people arguing over which gift is superior, and chapter 14, people arguing over their pride and how it's affected the church. What's happening in this church? Sheer disaster, kind of like -- 1 Corinthians looks like downtown Portland, Seattle, and Atlanta. So if you want a picture of what this church looked like -- go to downtown Portland. Go to Atlanta. Go to any large city. And you feel the tension, and you feel the chaos. And you feel the tragedy. That's the context of this chapter. It's not a wedding, my friends. I'm not saying don't use it in a wedding -- it's fine. I just think sometimes it's helpful to understand that where we're at today is a nation that -- other people have been there. And this text says, when you face that, there's a way of life that you must choose if you're a follower of Christ. Why? Because every person needs some kind of grid to determine the difference between what's important and what's critical. There are a lot of things that are important, things that matter. There are. There are huge issues that we face today. Huge issues that you face in your life. And sometimes you look at them all, and you're dipping out of the Atlantic, and you're putting the water at your feet, and you're feeling like, "Man, I'm working so hard! But I'm not making any difference." And the reality is, you need a grid. You need something that guides you. Why? Because I find in this life it seems that every person, whatever they have as their issue, says that -- "My area is the most important. My area is critical." Have you noticed that?

Years ago, when I was teaching at Denver Seminary, they made a fairly significant overhaul in their curriculum, about one-seventh of the hours -- that's no small amount, I think it was 140 some hours to graduate with a Master of Divinity -- and we were going to take one-seventh of it, and we were going to put it towards mentoring and training in terms of relationship in the church. Because, as Dr. Means used to say, "I've never seen a pastor fired because he couldn't parse a Greek verb. But I've seen all kinds of pastors fired because they didn't know how to lead a deacon board and they didn't know how to relate to people." And so, we took one-seventh of our hours. Now, that was the commitment -- one-seventh of our hours were in the area of mentoring in the development of human relationship and development of our pastors. Well, when you take one-seventh of the hours, let me tell you what's going to happen -- you gather all of the professors in a room, and now they're fighting for who gets to hold on to the hours that they used to have. Man, I am telling you -- I watched people say, in a thousand different ways, "My area is most crucial! You can't take away the Bible department! Let me tell you what -- you gotta -- I mean, a pastor without a good handle on the Bible is not worth his salt!" And then there would be the language people, and they would say, "Let me tell you what -- you can never understand the Bible unless you have a firm grasp on Ugaritic." And they had all kinds of fights. What were they fighting over? Kindly -- "My area's the most important."

It happens all over the place. When I go to the dentist, you know what my dentist tells me? "If your mouth's not healthy, nothing in your body is healthy," and she tells me, "Your mouth is the most important thing you take care of, and let me tell you what -- you floss every night, and you take that supercharged whatever that thing is called that jets into your mouth and makes you feel like you're getting punched by a thousand Mike Tysons every night." It's a beautiful moment. And she tells me, and she makes a case, and she tells me -- "Man, if you don't give 90 minutes a day to your mouth, you're a fool." And then I go over to my accountant, and he goes, "Let me tell you what -- if you don't look at your budget and take care of your budget, and deal with things, you're not going have money to buy floss. My area is the most important." And I walk out of both offices and I think, "Man, I'd like you guys to get together and have a conversation. Because you think my day has 72 hours and it doesn't! It's 24, just like you!" But they all think that what they are professionals in is the most important thing. Happens all the time. It happens in the church. Man, let me tell you what -- in 36, 37 years of pastoral ministry, I've had people argue for everything! "Pastor, worship is the most important" and another one, "the Word of God is the most important" -- not our current worship leaders, but I've had worship leaders say, "You know what -- tell you what, I think we should worship for 50 minutes and you should preach for 10." And I say, "Wow! How's your new job assignment going?" And then others, I mean, they've got all kinds of stuff. And we're always wrestling in the church -- what's most important? When we get to the area of children, absolutely.

Did you realize that somewhere in the vicinity of 80 percent of all people that ever come to Christ do so when they're children? Have you ever heard that? It's true. Therefore, every ministry in the church should be about kids, right? I mean, forget about -- I mean, collegiates? Too late, sorry. Worthless. And by the way, they don't tithe, so why should we ever care about collegiates? I mean, in my mind, if you want to go to the pure priority, it's like -- we should focus on children and those who pay the bills. And by the way, I've had that told me in 36 years probably 75 times. Let me tell you what's most important -- and everyone says, "MY area is most crucial."

We've got issues today, don't we? Huge issues. "Pastor, the most important thing the churches better stand up against is abortion." Okay. I agree with you, it's critical. It's inhumane what we're doing to children. "Pastor, the most important thing -- I tell you what, if we don't say something about justice, if we don't say something about race, if we don't say something about" -- and we just fill in the blank, and everyone is convinced that their area is most important. And they are important issues. Every one that I mentioned matters. And by the way, they matter to God. They're critical. But this text tells me that not every area carries the same weight. It doesn't. In fact, if you go just prior in your Bible, take chapter 13, verse one -- what does it begin with? "Now I will show you the most excellent way." See, there's a lead into chapter 13, and he tells you, "I'm gonna share with you the most excellent way." He even repeats that theme, if you go to chapter 14, at the very beginning. He says, chapter 14, verse one -- "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy." But then he goes on, and he speaks about a priority. "But if you don't have love," he says, "everything else is worthless." See, the fact is, not everything is equal. And when you get in this culture that we're in, much like the culture that they were in, the apostle Paul is coming to them and saying the church is marked by all kinds of division in Corinth. So divisive that when they would take communion, the wealthy would come in and start communion before the workers got off work. It was kind of a boycott against the blue-collar folks. And they would start communion, and by the time the folks got off work at five and came to church to share in communion, the others were saying, "Hey, it's great -- my belly's full! We'll see you later. God bless you -- be warm, be filled." "What happened to all the food?" "Well, we ate it." And the church was just having it out in all kinds of disagreement, and some were saying that "Wow, I've got the most supernatural gift, and therefore, because I have the most supernatural gift, the gift of tongues or the gift of prophecy, I should have a greater position than the rest of you." It was filled with divisiveness.

Paul comes to them and he goes, "I want to tell you about a more excellent way. It's more important than your gift of tongues, and it's way more important than your prophecy, and it's actually way more important than your generosity. I want to show you a more excellent way. Follow after love." Why? Because, as he goes on in this text, without love all of our great pursuits are worthless. Everything you stand for, if you don't love people, is worthless. Every child you save from an abortion clinic, if you don't love people -- when you get to Heaven is gonna be a zero. Every slave that you rescue from a slave trader coming out of Bangkok, and every dime you give to put on a building to erect a glorious building that is gonna be used by students at a Christian university -- God says, is one big goose egg if you don't love the person you're sitting next to. And he starts off with this kind of strange "Can you imagine" -- "Can you imagine if a person speaks in the tongues of men and of angels, but has not love?" That person, he says, is a resounding gong.

Think about what he just said. Can you imagine if a person can speak in the tongues of men? One time I was on a flight from Germany. I was with a friend, and we were flying back to the US, and we were on a Lufthansa flight. We'd been into Africa, and it was a long, long, trip, and I did one of my normal trips where I walk up to the service desk and I look as kind of grungy as I can, and say, "You know, it's a long trip. Do you have a possibility of a business class seat," you know? I've asked that 50 times. I think I've gotten it once. But that's all right. There's a lot of hope, because I got it once. And on this time, I got it. And I was bumped to Lufthansa business class. That's like first class on everybody else. This thing is unbelievable. You sit down, and the cheese slices and the smoked salmon comes right away. It's glorious. I'm talking to this lady, and I hear her speak to me in English, and she had marvelous English, and -- she went over here and she spoke to somebody else in another language, and, I'm not an expert

in language, but I can tell the difference between Russian and Portuguese. She goes back here, she finally comes back, and I said, "Ma'am, can I ask you a personal question?" She said "Yes." I said, "How many languages do you speak?" She goes, "Fluently, five." "French?" "Oh yeah." "Spanish?" "Yes." "Well certainly English, because you're having a conversation with me. Let me see...that sounded really guttural back there. Was that German?" "Yes." "And what's your fifth?" "Russian." Five languages she's fluent! I said, "You have got to be one of the most valuable people for Lufthansa that you could imagine." And she is. Can you imagine having the acquisition, the ability, to communicate in five different languages? How absolutely secure your position is around the world? That's nothing. Look again what God said about this person. If this person can speak in the tongues of men. Now what that means is, if this person can dialogue in every language of the world -- you realize how many languages there are in the world? I don't know how many back then, but today? That person's gonna speak in over 7,000 different languages. Now, I don't know about you, but if a person could speak in 7,000 different languages, fluent, that person would make one powerful missionary. That person probably could serve on virtually any international business in the world, because if you can speak fluently in 7,000 different languages, I guarantee you CNN, Fox News, and somebody else is gonna do a report on you. You're gonna be pretty impressive.

Oh, but it doesn't stop there. If he can speak or she can speak in the tongues of angels. What's that? I don't know. It just is important. If this individual can speak in every language in the world -- if you can imagine -- and, by the way, he can understand angelic -- but he doesn't have love, you know what he is? He's a gong. What is that? Have you ever seen a drummer that plays a cymbal? Some of you love drums. Most of us in this room love drums, and they can't be played loud enough -- right? That was a joke. This is just a little cymbal -- and when they hit it, it makes no musical tone. It doesn't. It's not in the key of "C". It's not gong in the key of "D". It's a percussion, it's a rhythm. It makes noise. And what God is saying is, this eloquent individual who can speak every language of the world, and understand angels -- if that person doesn't love others, he's nothing more than a loud noise in the kingdom of Heaven. He doesn't stop there. If they have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries, and knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains -- I think that's pretty significant. I've got brush piles around my property that I can't move, let alone mountains. If I was to go to Mt. Hood and say, "You know what? I want you to move over where Sisters is NOW." Guarantee you I'd be on the news that night. If you have the faith that you could walk into this hospital, you could walk in, imagine if you could walk into any hospital and say, "All COVID patients, you're healed -- go home." Guarantee you you'd be on the news that night. You would. But if you don't know how to love people, God says you don't count. Can you imagine if. And its result is this -- a life without love gains nothing. He says it in two ways. It's really powerful. Let's read together, as he says in verse two: "If I have the gift of prophecy and fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And if I give all that I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames but have not love, I gain nothing." They're both different -- they're two sides of the same coin. One, he's saying, you have no intrinsic value. You have nothing. You have nothing of a resource, you have nothing of which to draw upon. But not only that -- if you can do all of these things, when you stand in Heaven, you gain nothing. In other words, it will not get you a minute in Heaven if you can do all these things.

I don't know about you, but this is sobering to me. Because there are a lot of issues that we feel passionate about today. There are a lot of things that we feel like we should be about. And there are a lot of good things, a lot of important things. Things like drunk drivers that we want to get off the street. And yet, God says, if you fight drunk drivers your entire life and you do it out of hate because one of them took your wife -- you get a zero when you stand before God. If you march up to Portland -- it's one of the biggest sex trafficking cities in the United States, Seattle and Portland -- always want to run one and two, and if you go up there, and you're a lawyer, and all of a sudden you take this place on, but the reality is, inside of you, you don't love people, you're not moved by love, you're moved by anger, you're moved by something other than love -- God says when you stand before Heaven, it will value you not one dime, no matter how many slaves you've saved. And if you're a person of significant wealth -- significant wealth -- or a person of great sacrifice, if I surrender my body to the flames, what is that? We don't really know. Maybe he's talking like the Hebrew young guys, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they sacrificed their loves and they went into the fiery furnace, and you're willing to take that on, and you sacrifice, and you stand up for God, and you take a stand, and you say, "I'm gonna be against this, but

you don't love your neighbors and you don't love your family and you don't love your wife, you're not moved by love, you're moved by arrogance -- God says it doesn't matter. One of the possibilities of that text, it says that, you know, that you surrender your life to the flames, is that if you have a relative, a brother -- let's imagine -- that is enslaved, and you want that brother to be free, what you can do is, you can take a mark and they will burn it into your arm, kind of like a brand -- and you become the slave, you're marked like a slave, you're burned, surrendered to the flame, and then your brother is free. And you may say, "Hey, my brother's gonna make a huge difference for the kingdom of God!" And you go, and you take that, but you don't love people -- at the end of the day, people don't really matter to you. You are indifferent to them. You're into life like you're playing Monopoly -- "I just wanna own property. I just wanna get rich. I just wanna live a good life. I just wanna be able to tell the man off." At the end of the day, God says, our life doesn't matter. We don't gain anything. We don't have anything. Why? Because a life without love is nothing. So, the point is pretty simple. Love is what matters most. That's the priority God says you need to live with in all of life. If you speak and you do all of these things, and if you give all that you possess to the poor, but you don't have love -- I gain nothing.

One of the things that needs to guide my life and your life every day is asking myself the question: Do I love people? Not, Do I wanna preach? Do I love people. Not, Do I wanna lead a church? Do I love people. Not, Do I wanna see our school grow? Do I love those students. Not, I wanna rescue those with vocational barriers, and start a business, and let it grow and see it, you know, impact our culture. Naah -- at the end of the day, God says, that doesn't mean a hill of beans. Do you love them? Do those guys over there matter? Do the ladies that work at the coffee shop do they matter? What does it look like when a person matters to you? Maybe it's that you know their name, and maybe it's that you pray for them, and maybe it's that you greet them. Do they matter?

I remember one time at a graduate course -- I wasn't taking the course, but I was told about it from the person who was teaching the course. On the test, he said, "Who is the individual, what is the name of the individual that cleans our room?" And these upper-echelon graduate students at this fine university looked at that question and thought, "What kind of stupid question is that?" And the professor said, "It's the stupid kind of question that if you're gonna lead people, you're gonna lead all of them, and if they don't think they matter to you -- as a janitor -- let me tell you what, they can ruin your life." What does it look like to love people? It's to know the name of the person who cleans your room. It's to love them. Because love is what matters most. You can give generously -- God says, "I don't care." What matters most is, do you love people? The point is clear -- if you don't love people, your life at the end of the day is a zero. But the opposite is also true -- if you love people in ways that you can't imagine, your life counts. It's not a matter of having great wealth. It's not a matter of having a position of great significance. If you love people, God says your life has value, and it counts.

One day Jesus was with His disciples. He was at the temple area in the treasury. That's where people dropped off their offering. Jesus was sitting there with His disciples, and He said to them, "Hey, see that lady over there?" They all looked at her, and -- "Yeah. Do you know her, Jesus?" "No. But she just put in two little shekels, they call them the 'widow's mite,' and I just want you to know that that lady today, she tithed more than anyone else in this place." They looked at Jesus, like -- "Yeah, you're nuts! Do you know anything about the economy? Maybe you spent so much time in Heaven you don't have a clue about coinage!" "No, you don't understand." I mean, most people walk in here, they give out of their surplus. They give the kind of money that they think that they can live without. When she gave, she gave out of love. How do I know? She gave out of her poverty. When she gave, she gave out of everything she had. You see, when you love someone, you give, sometimes not out of the surplus of your life -- you alter your life. A busy day -- you clear it, because somebody matters to you. You cancel a few appointments, because you love someone. You make them important, because they matter to you. And Jesus says, if that's not moving in your heart, you're going to stand before God and it's going to be a shocking day, because God's gonna say it didn't count. If you don't love people, then everything that you do just simply doesn't matter. It doesn't. But when motivation comes, and it comes from God, it can change everything. It's true in life -- we have a lot of issues today, my friends. There's a lot of important things that we need to be speaking to. But over the next eight weeks, I want to talk about running up the flagpole and ask the question, What matters most? And for eight weeks, we're gonna look at this text. One other. But we're gonna ask the question -- what does love look like? If it matters most -- and God says that it does -- then what does it look like? What would it look like in a church dropped in the middle of the

United States when everyone is fighting over everything? What does love look like? What does it look like when we have huge and critical issues that are just struggling to keep us together, and we're seemingly fighting over everything? What does it look like for a church to say, What matters most? Many things matter today, but the most important thing, God says, is, you've got to do it in love. And when you do it in love, it changes the way you relate to people. We've all been made aware of a real threat -- death -- that has come to some Asian folks. It's tragic. I said even last summer with some of the vitriolic language that Asians were running around the United States wondering if they were gonna be safe. What does it look like to love people that are from a different race? That may feel today like they're wondering when you look at them, Do you hate me like everybody else?

The Russian community is scared that they're going to be lumped in with Putin, because he was just blasted, and -- I'm not here trying to make a political statement. I'm just here wondering, what happens when I really love people? Do I look at them through political eyes, or do I say, You know what -- you're made in the image of God, and I want you to know I care about you. We're scared to death to talk about race. Chandler said, who's a large church pastor, he said, "I've never been so afraid to preach in my life." Andy Stanley said, "I haven't been this afraid to speak in my life." And whether we read white fragility or the color of whatever, or whatever the case may be, our culture is scared, and -- one dear black brother said, "The most vulnerable person today in the world is a white male in America." I don't know if that's true. What I do know is, we're afraid. We're afraid to speak, we're afraid to live. We're afraid that we're gonna be canceled, we're gonna be written about, and somebody's gonna take something out on Facebook. And the question in the midst of that, which -- we can't change that, that's the reality -- there's not an island you can go to where we're not going to face this issue. What does love look like? Because God says it matters most. Love might move you across the street to walk up to a person of a different race and just say, out of the blue, "You know what? I just want you to know I care about you." You might purposely go into a Chinese restaurant and just say, "I'm here for one reason -- I want you to know I'm glad you live here." You say, "You'd do that?" Absolutely. Because that's what love does. It does whatever it can to meet the needs of another person, and it might be they're afraid.

There were five men who went to their pastor, and they wanted to start this ministry -- it's called Teen Challenge. It's a ministry that works with teenagers, younger people who have had drug issues. They went to their pastor, and they said, "You know what -- if we start this, we need your -- we'd love to have your support." And the pastor said, "Man, I'll tell you what -- it is gonna be such a beneficial thing if in our community we have a go-to place for kids, teens that are struggling with addiction. We can send them there, they can get off of drugs." And the guy that was leading the thing said, "I agree with you, but it's way more than that. Because if you come to our current graduation, you're gonna see five young men who are not only off of drugs, but they're training to be pastors. You see, it's way more than just getting them off of drugs -- it's helping them wrestle with why God put them here on this earth. And He didn't put them here on this earth just to get off drugs. If we love these people, we're gonna love them to the vision that God has for them." See, that's what love does. It doesn't just settle -- for ending, if you will, an issue -- drug addiction, you name it. Just ending drunken driving is not enough for God. He wants us to love people to the vision that God has for them. Why? Because that matters most.

There's a lot of things in this world that matter, and we're gonna talk about them over these next weeks. But the most important thing, God says, is, you've got to do everything in love. Or when you stand before God, He's gonna hit a cymbal, and He's gonna say, "That's what you were to me." Or -- you might walk through the pearly gates and He says to those who are standing next to Him, "Come over here. I want you to see a person who loved people, and he changed a city."

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