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1 Corinthians 13 in *St. Paul's Letter to American Churches*

On November 4, 1956, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a sermon, titled *St. Paul's Letter to American Churches*, at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. In this creative message, he presented an imaginary epistle of the apostle Paul. In the sermon, King listed numerous things of which Americans may justifiably be proud, but pointed to problems of racial discrimination as evidence that the country was lacking in love, which Paul had told the Corinthians mattered more than all other marks of success.

The concluding paragraphs of the sermon draw on 1 John 4:7–8 and, especially, 1 Corinthians 13:

I must say to you, as I said to the church at Corinth, that I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world. . . .

This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, "God is love." He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God.

So American Christians,

You may master the intricacies of the English language.

You may possess all of the eloquence of articulate speech.

But even if you “speak with the tongues of man and angels, and have not love, you are become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” . . .

You must come to see that it is possible for a man to be self-centered in his self-denial and self-righteous in his self-sacrifice. He may be generous in order to feed his ego and pious in order to feed his pride. Man has the tragic capacity to relegate a heightening virtue to a tragic vice. Without love benevolence becomes egotism, and martyrdom becomes spiritual pride.

So the greatest of all virtues is love. It is here that we find the true meaning of the Christian faith.

This is at bottom the meaning of the cross. The great event on Calvary signifies more than a meaningless drama that took place on the stage of history. It is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking forth into time.

It is an eternal reminder to a power drunk generation that love is most durable power in the world, and that it is at bottom the heartbeat of the moral cosmos.

Only through achieving this love can you expect to matriculate into the university of eternal life.