

A Love for Others

The Point: We are to love others as God loves us.

Session Passage: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Connection to the Point: Love is foundational to everything we do.

Context. The Corinthian believers were elevating certain spiritual gifts above others. In chapter 12, Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit graciously has given a variety of spiritual gifts to the church for His purposes. While there is a variety of spiritual gifts, the church is one united body. After listing various spiritual gifts, Paul wrote, “But desire the greater gifts. And I will show you an even better way” (12:31). The Corinthians were prioritizing showy gifts and neglecting love. Love for the body of Christ is superior to all the spiritual gifts, and the gifts are only effective and Christ-honoring when accompanied by love. Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts continues in chapter 14, so chapter 13 is an intentional aside to demonstrate that love is indeed “an even better way” rather than any of the spiritual gifts.

Human or angelic tongues (v. 1). This phrase refers to different types of tongues in the sense of languages. Paul was not necessarily asserting that humans can speak in the angelic language. Instead, Paul was employing hyperbole—something like “even if you were able to speak all of the known human languages and even pressed forward into the languages of angels and heavenly beings that we cannot even imagine,” that gift or ability would be less important than love for one another.

Love (v. 1). The theme of love runs through this entire chapter and provides a foundation upon which Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14 is based. Without love, all the spiritual gifts are not only useless but potentially destructive. There were three Greek terms for “love” used in Greco-Roman culture. The first, *eros*, refers to sexual love and is not found in the New Testament. The second, *phileo*, refers to the affection between friends or family members. The third, *agape*, is the term used by Paul in this verse and describes God’s unconditional love for believers. It is the type of love believers are to have for one another.

Gong . . . cymbal (v. 1). The sound of a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal is uncomfortable and possibly even painful. Instead of communicating a specific mood, emotion, or sentiment, as these musical instruments are designed to do, Paul was telling the believers in Corinth that these otherwise useful instruments can be made useless and even unsettling when misused. With this concept in view, Paul said that the exercise of the gift of tongues without love is worthless to the church. An unloving application of this gift is disruptive and potentially damaging and destructive to the body of Christ. Instead of exhorting, encouraging, and building up the church, the exercise of the gift of tongues without accompanying love can aggravate and even irritate those it purports to encourage.

Gift of prophecy (v. 2). Just as Paul used hyperbole to discuss the gift of tongues, he once again used hyperbole to discuss the gift of prophecy. Neither Paul nor anyone else knew all the mysteries of God or possessed all knowledge. Paul did have the gift of prophecy (Acts 13:1), announced the mystery of God (1 Cor. 2:1), and proclaimed God’s hidden wisdom (v. 7). He was a manager of the mysteries of God (4:1). But again, no one knows all the mysteries of God and possesses all knowledge. However, even if someone did possess such a gift, that gift and the person possessing that gift would be “nothing” without love.

Move mountains (v. 2). Jesus’s words about faith moving mountains indicate that even a small amount of faith could move mountains if God so willed it (Matt. 17:19-20). In that context, Jesus emphasized that the object of one’s faith is more important than the strength of one’s faith, and it seems to be referring to the kind of faith that all believers exercise. Mountain-moving faith was also an expression that communicated the ability to do miraculous things. In 1 Corinthians 13:2, Paul was speaking in hyperbole by referring to one who had the perfect manifestation of “all faith.” Paul’s central idea was the same as in his discussion of tongues and prophecy—all spiritual gifts are subordinate to the practice of love.

I give over my body (v. 3). In John 15:13, Jesus taught that “No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends” By speaking about laying down one’s life in this way, Jesus elevated self-sacrifice to the highest level of neighborly and brotherly love. Here in 1 Corinthians and in the final hypothetical situation that he imagined in these verses, Paul wrote that one could theoretically carry out selfless actions in a boasting manner that did not profit anyone. A life of giving away all of one’s earthly possessions or even literally giving up one’s life for others is useless if it is not accompanied by love.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Connection to the Point: Love reflects the character of Christ.

Patient (v. 4). Many of the adjectives Paul used to describe love in these verses are similar to the words he used to describe the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. By describing love as patient, Paul was saying that love puts the needs of others before one’s own needs, trusting that God will meet one’s own needs in time. It can also mean being long-suffering, refraining from lashing out at others who offend or hurt us.

Kind (v. 4). Paul paired kindness, an active quality, with patience, which is a passive quality. “Kind” carries the senses of one who is loving and merciful. Throughout the New Testament, kindness is often contrasted with harshness and cruelty. God in Christ has been kind to sinners (Eph 2:7). God intends this kindness to lead people to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

Does not envy (v. 4). After beginning with two positive descriptors, Paul turned to several negative descriptors to teach what love is not like. First, a person who loves does not envy; he or she is not jealous of what other people have or do but is content with how God has providentially provided for him or her.

Not boastful (v. 4). Paul not only condemned envy, but he also denounced boasting. To be boastful is to brag or excessively praise oneself. Paul may have had in mind the factions mentioned earlier in the book (1:12) as well as self-pride in one’s spiritual gifts. Love motivates us to be concerned for others, not ourselves.

Not arrogant (v. 4). Arrogance is similar to boastfulness. To be arrogant is to have an exaggerated view of oneself. Paul described the church at Corinth as arrogant five other times in this letter (4:6,18,19; 5:2; 8:1). The arrogance of the believers at Corinth seems to have been at the center of their unhealthiness as a church.

Not rude (v. 5). Rudeness is the opposite of respectful and proper behavior. It is to behave in a manner that is indecent and/or unbecoming. Love acts in an appropriate manner and with respect for other people.

Not self-seeking (v. 5). Following closely on the idea of rudeness, Paul asserted that love is not narcissistic or egotistical. It does not insist on its own way. Love looks out for the good of others before it looks out for itself (Rom. 15:1; 1 Cor 10:33; Phil. 2:4).

Not irritable (v. 5) describes one who is not easy to provoke or exasperate. James 1:19 says, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” Paul taught something similar here—love is slow to

become angry. Notice that this does not mean that love is permissive or lenient with sin. Instead, Paul was teaching that love is not short-tempered but is patient with others.

Does not keep a record of wrongs (v. 5). In Matthew 18, Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive any brother or sister who sinned against him and sought to justify himself by suggesting seven times. Jesus's response of "seventy times seven" indicates that Jesus's disciples should not keep a record of how many times another sins against them (Matt. 18:21-22) and that such forgiveness should originate from the heart (v. 35). Loving one another means not keeping track of the wrongs done to one another. We are to forgive one another, just as God forgave us in Christ (Eph. 4:32).

Finds no joy in unrighteousness (v. 6). Wisdom and love go hand in hand. One result of having wisdom and love is that we will reject unrighteousness and evil. Solomon taught that wisdom will rescue God's people "from those who enjoy doing evil and celebrate perversion" (Prov. 2:14).

Rejoices in the truth (v. 6). After several negative descriptors, Paul returned to using positive descriptions of love. Rejoicing in the truth is the opposite of finding joy in unrighteousness. "Love does not rejoice in behaving unjustly toward others but instead embraces God's way of righteousness in relation to others, that is, love 'rejoices with the truth.'" ¹

Bears all things (v. 7). While the Lord calls Christians to hold one another accountable (Matt. 18:15-17), they are also called to bear with one another. The Greek term (*stego*) also has the meaning of keeping something confidential or passing over something in silence. One New Testament image for the church is the family of God, and family members bear with and care for one another (Col. 3:12-13).

Believes all things (v. 7) is not a call to be undiscerning in theology and doctrine. Believing all things focuses on God and His promises. It could also mean that while believers are to be discerning, we should not assume the worst about others.

Hopes all things (v. 7). Love has faith in the future grace of God. God is faithful (1:9) and unchanging (Jas. 1:17). The way that God has acted with love, grace, and faithfulness in the past is a guarantee of how He will act in the future. The way that He has provided and cared for His people marks how He will always do so.

Endures all things (v. 7). To endure is to persevere. This phrase is similar to the idea expressed in not keeping a record of wrongs. Enduring the failures and foibles of other believers is part of being a Christian. Love endures in this age with an expectation of better things in the age to come (1 Pet. 1:3-7).

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Connection to the Point: Love does not diminish, fade, or go away.

Prophecies, they will come to an end (v. 8). The reasons that prophecies will cease are because of the nature and purpose of prophets. Prophets are fundamentally God's mouthpieces who declare His words to His people. This role will be unnecessary in the age to come, because God will be present with His people and will have made an end to sin. The phrases "will come to an end" and "will cease" are both associated with the age to come.

Tongues, they will cease (v. 8). As with prophecies, the purpose of the gift of tongues is to communicate truth about God. In the age to come, all of God's people will be in communion with one another and with God to such an extent that the gift of tongues will be unnecessary.

Knowledge, it will come to an end (v. 8). Paul was not saying that knowledge of the truth will come to an end. The present truths that we know about God now will continue, and in eternity, we will also continue to know, understand, and learn more about God. Since God is eternal and infinite, there will be no end to our growth in knowledge of Him. However, in this passage, Paul was saying that in the age to come the spiritual gift of knowledge will not only be limited to some. Instead, all of God’s people will know Him in a direct relational way.

When the perfect comes (v. 10). “The perfect” is the perfected kingdom of Christ that Jesus will consummate when He returns to put an end to sin and death. The storyline of Scripture is the story of God’s unfolding revelation of Himself to His people. As the New Testament people of God, we have received a fuller and more complete picture of God’s revelation than God’s people in the past. However, we still live in “the already, but not yet” time in which we enjoy the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but experiencing the fullness of God’s presence is yet to come.

The partial (v. 10) refers to how Christians are experiencing salvation partially at this time. When the kingdom of Christ comes in all its fullness at the second coming of Christ, sin and death will be done away with and the Lord will glorify believers. We will no longer sin and will live with God eternally.

I will know fully, as I am fully known (v. 12). By saying that he would know “fully” and be known “fully,” Paul was not saying that he will know God exhaustively. One aspect of God’s existence and nature is that He is infinite. Therefore, God is beyond our ability to *exhaustively* comprehend. However, even now God has given us the ability to know Him *truly* by revealing Himself to us—which He has done most clearly in the person of Jesus. By saying we will know fully in the age to come, Paul was teaching that our sin nature will no longer hinder our understanding of God (“now we see only a reflection as in a mirror”), and we will instead know God as He is (“face to face”). The astonishing truth, however, is that we will have all eternity to continue to learn more and more about God.

The greatest of these is love (v. 13). Paul’s entire discussion leads up to this declaration. It began with Paul’s declaration that love is “an even better way” regarding any and all of the spiritual gifts (12:31). Here the apostle brought the discussion of love to an end by declaring that it is the greatest. One of the reasons that love is greater than all the spiritual gifts is because those gifts will cease and will not exist in the age to come. However, faith, hope, and love will all remain in the coming age, yet Paul taught here that love is even greater than faith and hope. The reason that love is greater than faith and hope is because love “is the purpose and goal of faith and hope.”² Faith is founded upon the love of God the Father, who sent God the Son to lovingly lay down His life for us. Further, love endures forever because “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Hope is trust that in His love God will bring His people through this present age and into the age to come, where faith will be sight and God’s people will dwell in His loving presence for all eternity.

1. Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 28, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 312.

2. Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 282.