

THE EXCELLENCY OF LOVE

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
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Let's Begin

Paul spoke of spiritual gifts in general in chapter 12. We learned how gifts are to be defined and implemented in the local church body. Next week (chapter 14), we will explore what happens when one spiritual gift is not only implemented, but implemented wrongly and exclusively above all other gifts.

Sandwiched between spiritual gifts and their improper use is Paul's great exposition of love. He identifies love as the more excellent way (12:31). Without it, Christians only send out a most uncertain sound (v. 1).

Thus, as we begin our study of chapter 13, let's follow the outline below:

- I. The Priority of Love (vv. 1-3)**
- II. The Personality of Love (vv. 4-7)**
- III. The Permanency of Love (vv. 8-13)**

I. The Priority of Love (vv. 1-3)

We must acknowledge that Paul's words on love are often taken out of context. 1 Corinthians 13 is too many times taken as applicable only to marital vows during weddings. Nothing is further from Paul's mind than weddings!

The Corinthians had become obsessed with spiritual gifts. They seemed to believe spiritual gifts stood as the most significant measure of a believer's life, and not just any of the spiritual gifts, but only the most sensational gifts were the ones the Corinthians admired. These circumstances became the occasion for the most beautiful prose on love ever penned by a human being. The great Baptist Greek scholar, A.T. Robertson notes, "1 Corinthians 13 comes like a sweet bell between the jangling noise of chapter 12 and chapter 14."

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As the chapter unfolds we begin to see love as the atmosphere for exercising spiritual gifts. It is the climate which makes gifts effective. If love fails, the church's use of spiritual gifts becomes like children in a playpen hitting each other with their toys. Hence, 1 Corinthians 13 reveals the priority Paul places on love.

Paul begins by focusing on the absence of love; that is, he begins by suggesting what it would be like if love was not present. He writes, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become *as* sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

First, without love, spiritual gifts are noise (v. 1). In Greek religion, the worship of Dionysus and Cybele were noted for the clanging cymbals during worship. Paul likens such noise to



speaking gifts which offer no sure meaning. Human language is most powerful and may stand as one of the most enlightening differences between humans and the animal kingdom. Language moves human wills for good and evil. One need only consider Hitler's charismatic speeches which kept masses spellbound for hours as he spoke his twisted agenda.

At Corinth, there was a visible dispute over tongues (chapter 14). Indeed, tongues was causing deep confusion leading to chaotic practices. Why? Paul clearly says it was because of the absence of love. The so-called "worship" the Corinthians were experiencing was merely a "sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." If love is absent from language, Paul says one is just one big noise! Jesus drove home the point concerning the significance of the words we speak when He said, "every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment" (Matt. 12:36).

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Reflection Connection

Do you think there is sufficient emphasis on love in the church today? Explain. Is it possible to allow love to dilute the Christian faith? If so, how?

Second, without love we are nothing (vv. 2-3). Clearly, without love Paul reduces a Christian's life to a flat zero.—"I am nothing." Realize Paul is not referring to human knowledge in these verses. Instead he is referring to the spiritual gift of knowledge (cp. 12:8). The same is true with faith. The gift of faith is able to move mountains (cp. Matt. 12:21). However, the gift of faith apart from love may still move mountains but mountains are moot apart from love. Moved mountains count zero if love does not motivate their removal.

In addition, giving may be sacrificial, so sacrificial that all one's goods are relinquished to feed the poor. Yet without love, the sacrifice "profits nothing." One needs only recall Ananias and Sapphira's gift offered to the fledging church in Jerusalem to understand what happens to those who sacrifice without love (Acts 5:1-6). Sacrifice also includes the offering of one's body (v. 3). A martyr's death is hollow apart from love. Love remains the supreme value in the Christian's life. Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

II. The Personality of Love (vv. 4-7)

Love may be the hardest thing in the world to define. Paul focuses on a description rather than a definition. He wants us to see what love is rather than just grasp a definition. If you want to know what love is, the best way is to see what love does. Since love is so bound up with human action, we cannot avoid concluding love has a personal dimension as it is expressed. Note Paul's words, "Charity suffereth long, *and* is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." (1 Cor. 13:4-7).



First, love expresses itself in the mastery of one's personality. Paul says love, "envieth not." In other words, love is not jealous. Love does not wish for another's gifts; instead love not only prays one's own gift may be used for God's glory, but also prays for another's gift to be used mightily for the Lord. A good question to ask of another believer is, does his or her success in ministry produce jealousy or joy?

Neither does love "vaunteth itself." Love makes no parade of doing good. Love does it because it is right not because it looks right to others. Love is "not puffed up." Pride is the hardest kind of attitude to check. Love avoids pride of every stripe.

In addition, love does not "behave itself unseemly." By this Paul means love always displays good manners. It is not self-righteously ugly. He goes on to affirm that love "is not easily provoked." It possesses no sharp spirit. Instead, love "rejoices in the truth" rather than in "iniquity." Love avoids all juicy pieces of gossip.

One must be mastered by love before one can minister in love.

Second, love expresses itself in the ministry of one's personality. One must be mastered by love before one can minister in love. Love "suffers" long. Love always has a long fuse. Love expresses itself through vigilant patience.

In addition, love is "kind." Love shows one as mild in personality. Hence, love seeks never to "think evil" of another. Instead, love looks for the positive not the negative. Love keeps no score of faults in other people.

Paul further indicates love both "bears" all things as well as "believes" all things. The term translated "bear" means "to cover." In other words, love protects. Nor is love suspicious. It believes the best about people.

Finally, love expresses itself in hope. Therefore love endures. It never fails. Are these traits expressed in your life? Remember: without love we are nothing. Love is the greatest measure to detect the Spirit-filled life. A Christian may be highly gifted in many ways. He or she may be able to move large crowds with either persuasive speaking skills or a trained solo voice. However, without love as the basis of Christian service, it always profits nothing for the Kingdom of God.

Reflection Connection

Is it your practice to measure effectiveness in Christian work by the love in the heart? Do you think measuring a person's effectiveness by talent is used more often than by measuring by love? Why or why not?

III. The Permanency of Love (vv. 8-13)

Paul capstoned his great chapter on love with these marvelous words, "Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies, they shall fail; whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then



face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity (vv. 8-13).

J. B. Phillips wrote, "Love is the only thing that still stands when all else has fallen." Love—genuine love—offers no signs of decay. As Paul bluntly says, "love never fails." Consequently, at least two outcomes result from love's permanency.

First, since love never fails, love outlasts all the gifts (vv. 8-11). Paul does not make such a statement concerning the other gifts. He flatly affirms prophecies, tongues, and knowledge all pass away (vv. 8-9). Interestingly, the verbs Paul uses make sharp distinctions on these gifts. Simply put, Paul implies something shall cause prophesy and knowledge to cease. However, tongues shall cease entirely on its own. Why does he make this distinction?

Paul partly makes the distinction because prophecy and knowledge fit into what he describes as "that which is in part" and which is "done away" (v. 10). And, when is that which is in part—namely, knowledge and prophecy—to be done away? Paul answers, "when that which is perfect is come." The perfection to which Paul refers is something complete, something full, and/or something total.

Some have interpreted the perfection as Jesus Christ Himself. Hence, they conclude Paul is referencing the Second Coming of Christ. However, not only is the Second Coming not in the scope of the text under consideration, the Greek word Paul uses forbids the term "something" referring to a person. Instead, Paul was speaking about an inanimate object.

To what, then, is Paul referring when he speaks of "that which is perfect is come"? The key is found in verse 12, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." Corinth was widely known for its manufacture of polished metal mirrors. Yet, even as sophisticated as the mirrors were, they produced but an imperfect reflection.

What is more, Scripture is viewed as a mirror, reflecting the moral condition of our lives before God. The Apostle James writes, "For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth *therein*, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed" (Jas. 1:23-25; cp. also 2 Cor. 3:18). What is Paul referring to when he speaks of that which is perfect is come?

It seems clear Paul refers not to the Second Coming of Christ but to the completion of the New Testament. The Bible—God's perfect mirror to reflect perfectly man's moral image—will make the partial and incomplete gifts (knowledge and prophecy) obsolete! When the canon is final, the prophetic gifts are no longer needed. Why? Because God's Word as recorded in the Bible is all the knowledge and prophecy we need (cp. Rev. 22:18).

On the other hand, tongues belong to a very different category. They will cease in and of themselves. Indeed Paul says, "tongues will cease." Why? Partially because tongues were a sign for the unbelieving Jewish nation (14:22). Furthermore, signs were indicative of new works from God. Hence, while tongues were a sign God was initiating a new work (Acts 2:1-4), thus belonging to the infancy of the

Reflection Connection

In what way does the Bible fulfill the role of God's perfection? If the Bible is perfect, why are there so many varied interpretations? Explain.



Golden Greek Nugget

Throughout chapter 13, the KJV translates as “charity” the Greek term *agapē*. Often this term is contrasted with another Greek word for love *phileo*, which has to do primarily with love for another person because of the intrinsic worth in that person. For example, brother would love his sibling brother because of blood connections. The city of Philadelphia is the “city of brotherly love.” However, *agapē* is used with reference to God’s love toward man. It involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires. In addition, it is a love that points to a basic quality in the one who loves not the one loved. In other words, God’s love for us is because He is so great not because we are so lovable. Indeed *agapē* stands as the very reason He can love us even though we are sinful, rebellious human beings. Christ died for us while we were still sinners! (Rom. 5:8).

church, there is no reason to expect tongues to remain in the church anymore than the raising of the dead by the Apostles! Nor should the church today attempt to recreate what God initially did when the church first began.

Second, since love never fails, love outranks all the other graces (vv. 12-13). Faith, hope, and love often go together in the New Testament (1 Thess. 1:3). In fact, these three graces appear to top the list in the life of believers. Faith cares for the past; hope cares for the future; and love cares for the present. All three will endure, Paul affirms. But by far, the greatest of the three is love.

In heaven we will be eternally trusting God. In addition, heaven will mean joy for us and the glory of God unfolding forever. Even so, we think of heaven as a time when eternal love will mark the community life of God’s people. There will be no hatred, no gossip, no slander, no covetousness, and no false rumors. No wonder Paul implores believers to “pursue love” (14:1).

Wrap Up

Love is the undeniable, non-negotiable mark of every Christian believer. Paul insists without love, our lives are empty and vain. Since he places so much emphasis on love, should we not practice love with much more intensity? Love is the one thing you and I can do which will never fail.

