

Divine Love

Printed Text · 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: DEFINE Paul's understanding of love as the apex of the Spirit-led life; APPRECIATE love as motivation to share our God-given gifts; and ACT in love when sharing our God-given gifts.

In Focus

Selena was president of the church's usher board. She was always on time, impeccably uniformed, and knew all of the hand signals. Whenever Selena was on duty, the members had their envelopes and fans before they requested them; she immediately moved forward when she heard crying babies — firmly removing them from their parent's arms and delivering them to the nursery so the services could proceed without disruption.

As she moved about the sanctuary this morning, Selena was clearly irritated. She had met with Pastor Bob Jenkins on Saturday afternoon, and he had been critical of her work. Pastor complimented Selena on her faithfulness and dedication. However, he said while she clearly enjoyed being an usher, he was concerned that she didn't love the members. "Nothing can replace our love for others," Pastor Jenkins said. "Working on their behalf is fine, but it is meaningless unless our work is motivated by love. Christian love is essential to make any ministry effective."

Selena was so distracted thinking about the pastor's rebuke that she dropped the offering plate during service. It clanged loudly and spilled its contents on the floor. As congregants helped her pick everything up, Selena realized her loveless attitude was a disruption to the service; it was worse than the loud cry of a baby. Selena took a calming breath and prayed God would fill her with patience, kindness, and all the attributes of love.

When have you had to remind yourself to minister in love rather than just fulfill a church obligation?

Keep In Mind

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (1 Corinthians 13:13, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Charity (1 Corinthians 13:1) agape (Gk.) — Love, fellowship, affection, benevolence, or specifically divine kindness

B. Tongues (v. 1) glossa (Gk.) — Languages

Say It Correctly

Achaia. ah-KIE-ah

Peloponnesian. peh-low-pow-NEES-ee-ean

Agean. ah-GEE-an

KJV

1 Corinthians 13:1 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.
2 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.
3 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.
4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,
5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;
6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;
7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.
8 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.
9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.
10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.
11 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.
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.
13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

NLT

1 Corinthians 13:1 If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
2 If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing.
3 If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.
4 Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud
5 or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged.
6 It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out.
7 Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.
8 Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever!
9 Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture!
10 But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.
11 When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things.
12 Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.
13 Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

The People, Places, and Times

Corinth. The city of Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, which included the southern half of Greece. The ancient Greek city-state of Corinth had been completely destroyed in 146 BC when the Romans conquered the area. In 44 BC, Julius Caesar ordered that the city be rebuilt as a Roman colony. Corinth was a major trade city located on an isthmus that connects cities in northern Greece, like Athens and Delphi, with cities on the Peloponnesian peninsula, like Sparta and Olympia. It also benefited from maritime trade on the Aegean Sea to the east and on the Gulf of Corinth to the west. This location made Corinth a bustling trade and cultural center.

Corinth was socially, culturally, and religiously diverse. In fact, in AD 49 a good number of Jews who were expelled from Rome resettled in Corinth. The Christians of Corinth reflected the diversity of the city. Congregations included wealthy persons, merchants, slaves, and former slaves. During the time in which Paul wrote, Corinth was known for its wanton sexual immorality. The Greek word *korinthiazesthai* (KO-rin-thee-ADZ-ess-thai), which means to live like a Corinthian, meant that one lived immorally.

Background

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians while he was living and ministering in the city of Ephesus. The letter was written between AD 53 and 55. During his time in Ephesus, he had also received a letter from the church at Corinth (7:1) expressing confusion about marriage, divorce, corporate worship, bodily resurrection, and living in a pagan society. Paul wrote to encourage the Corinthians and to emphasize the importance of holiness. He also wrote to correct their misunderstanding and abuse of spiritual gifts, which he discussed in chapter 12. Chapter 13 is often misinterpreted, which leads to its improper application as merely an ode to the virtues of love. Paul was using 1 Corinthians 13 to address specific issues in the Corinthian church: selfishness, division, abuse of gifts, and envy.

The Greek term for love (KJV: charity) used in this chapter is *agape* (ah-GAH-pay). This word is closely associated with the Hebrew word *chesed* (KHESS-ed), which refers to God's covenant love for His people. Because of this association, *agape* became a keyword for describing God's character and took on the meaning of a divine love that is deeply loyal. Believers should emulate this love.

At-A-Glance

1. Love is Superior (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)
2. Characteristics of Love (vv. 4–7)
3. Love Endures (vv. 8–13)

In Depth

1. Love is Superior (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

The Corinthians held eloquence in especially high esteem and were somewhat preoccupied with the gift of tongues. However, even the most sophisticated gift of tongues is just noise if not exercised in love. Prophecy, though a desirable gift (14:1), is useless without love. Knowledge of the deepest mysteries of God has no value apart from love. Faith, even when great enough to move mountains, is nothing apart from love. Likewise, boundless generosity is not profitable without love. Willingness to suffer, even to the point of martyrdom, is

worthless in the absence of love.

Love is essential. Spiritual gifts are nothing without love; they can even be destructive when not practiced in love. Love is what enriches the gifts and gives them value. Whatever our gifts, love should be the motivating factor and pleasing God our objective.

If works without love are useless, should we stop making an effort to give of ourselves?

2. Characteristics of Love (vv. 4–7)

Paul gives a beautifully elaborate and poetic description of love that can be summed up in verse 7: love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. Paul's use of language implies that love must be active at all times. Love "beareth all things." It withstands the assault and protects those under its sphere of influence. Love "believeth all things." It is always willing to give the benefit of the doubt. Love "hopeth all things," and does not despair. Love "endureth all things," including temptation or testing.

Paul highlights the character of love as Christians should express it. His descriptions of love are active, indicating that love is something one does, not merely an emotion. As Christians, we have received the love of God. Therefore, we are to love others. Contrary to what many believe, love is not an abstract notion. Love is practical and must be put into practice on a daily basis. Christians must constantly be aware of their actions and ask themselves, "Did I show love in that situation or toward that person?" Paul explains that love results in characteristics that can be seen and heard.

Describe how you have seen these aspects of love shown in Christians you admire.

3. Love Endures (vv. 8–13)

Love surpasses all the other spiritual gifts because they will pass away, while love endures forever. Prophecy, tongues, and knowledge are limited (v. 9). Further, a time will come when those gifts will not be necessary. They are given by the Spirit for the building and maturation of the church. We will not need such things in heaven, but we will experience love there.

We exercise our gifts imperfectly. Our knowledge is imperfect, like seeing indirectly, as if through a bronze mirror. (Corinth was well known for its bronze artistry and bronze mirrors.) However, imperfection will give way to perfection, enabling us to see perfectly. In the perfection of heaven, we will experience love eternally. Because love is eternal and is superior to the other spiritual gifts, it is childish to focus on spiritual gifts to the exclusion of love.

Not only is love superior to spiritual gifts, it is also superior to faith and hope. Just as in heaven we will no longer need prophecy or tongues, we will also no longer need faith when we finally see God. At that point, all hope will be fulfilled (cf. Romans 8:24). Since love outlasts all of these, love is the greatest gift of all.

How are we to "put away childish things" but still retain child-like faith?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why is love superior to the other spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 13:8)?
2. Make a list of what specifically Paul says love does (vv. 4–8)
3. After other spiritual gifts cease to exist, what will remain (v. 13)?

Discuss The Meaning

1. As we continually experience the love of God, how can we show His love to others? How can we demonstrate more love in our relationships? How can we express love in difficult situations?
2. Paul writes to the Corinthians in response to their abuse and misunderstanding of spiritual gifts. What are some of the practical ways we can work to ensure that all members of the body of Christ, regardless of their spiritual gifts, are loved and valued?

Liberating Lesson

Over 500,000 children in the U.S. currently reside in some form of foster care. Two-thirds of these children are African American, and they stay in foster care longer. The challenges of these children are complex and may include blaming themselves and feeling guilty about removal from their birth parents, feeling unwanted if awaiting adoption for a long time, and feeling helpless about multiple changes in foster parents over time. These children are in desperate need of love. How can you help? In many states across the U.S., you are probably eligible to become a foster or adoptive parent. You must be over the age of 21 and financially stable. You must also meet certain safety requirements, such as criminal and child abuse screening. There are no preferences made to race or ethnic origin, educational background, marital status, occupation, or homeownership. How might helping or even fostering these children show the love of God? Consider becoming a foster parent.

Application For Activation

True love comes from God. It is the very nature of God. We demonstrate our love for God when we show our love for one another. We are often frustrated in our church work, especially when it feels as though others are not as committed as we are. Over the next week, pray and ask God to reveal to you areas where you may have failed to demonstrate love toward your co-laborers. Then, ask God what you can do to remedy the situation. Also, ask Him how to show love to those who don't show it to you. It may call for you to make apologies, seek forgiveness, or even forgive others; but it will be worth it.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

1 Corinthians 13

Paul spends time explaining the character of agape (Gk. AH-gah-pay) to the Corinthian church. In the King James Version of the Bible, agape is translated “charity.” When we think of charity, we usually think of giving to others, an active expression of Christian love. This is not the limit of the meaning of “charity.” Charity is also understood as it relates to the similar word “cherish.” To show charity to someone is to show that you cherish them. This includes, but also goes far beyond, giving alms or offerings, as Paul further explains.

When Paul speaks of “charity,” we should read that word as “love.” More importantly, we should know that Paul is speaking of a specific form of love. He is not talking about eros (E-ro-tes), or the sensual or erotic form of love. Nor is Paul describing philia (F-IHLIYAH), which means “a brotherly affection or friendship.” Rather, Paul is describing agape, “a commitment of the will to cherish and uphold another person.” In the Bible, this is the form of love that is always used when we describe God’s love. Agape describes our willful and deliberate decision to treat others with the utmost care and concern. Hope allows us to esteem the best interests of our brother or sister above our own.

1 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. 2 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.

Love is a radical reordering of priorities and ultimate values. The person is no longer the center of his or her universe or ultimate concern; “the other” is now in the center. Without love, everything we do is for our own self-glorification and benefit. With love, what we do is for God and others. Love is not a feeling; it is what we do for others without regard for self. It is partaking in the very nature of God because He is love (1 John 4:8).

Spirit-inspired speech spoken in ecstasy, different languages, brilliant human rhetoric, or superhuman entreaties mean nothing if they are not of God. Any intention whose source is not the God of love is in vain. If the Spirit of God animates the body, love holds it together. Tongues without love are only noise. The gift of prophecy or preaching is mere entertainment or scolding and has no effect if the speaker is not motivated by love. The gift of intellectual accomplishment without love leads to contempt and snobbery. The gift of great faith that gives much or sacrifices greatly can lead to false pride. None of these gifts edifies the body of Christ or pleases God unless they are done in love.

3 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.

Benevolence and even self-sacrifice can be great for those on the receiving end or in the eyes of the world. In terms of our own spiritual maturity, it means nothing without love. To give out of obligation, self-promotion, or even contempt can profit those who are poor and needy, but it does not profit the giver unless the spirit of love is present.

The Corinthian Christians were missing the motive and the goal of the gifts, making the means to become their own end. But for Paul, love says it all. It is not an issue of love versus gifts. Paul stresses that the focus and end of the gifts is love. The gifts are not for

their own sake. For gifts to be effective, love must guide their use.

4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, 5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; 6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

Paul describes a life characterized by love (vv. 4–6). He presents an other-centered life in action.

1) Love “suffereth long” (Gk. makrothumeo, mah-kro-thoo-MEH-oh)—or endures patiently—the errors, weaknesses, and even meanness of people. Love makes us slow to anger. It will suffer many things for the sake of the relationship. If God’s love is in us, we will be longsuffering to those who annoy us and hurt us.

2) Love is kind. Kindness is demonstrated in simple acts, such as giving a cup of water to the thirsty (Matthew 25:42).

3) Love “envieth not” (Gk. zeloo, zay-LOH-oh). It does not earnestly covet another’s good fortune. Love does not get angry at another’s success.

4) Love “vaunteth not,” or does not brag about itself. It is not boastful or stuck up. Love does not parade itself: Love in action can work anonymously. It does not have to have the limelight or the attention to do a good job or to be satisfied with the result. Love gives because it loves to give without the praise of showing itself off.

5) Love is not “puffed up” (Gk. phusioo, foosee-OH-oh), snobbish, or arrogant. Loving people esteem others higher than themselves. To be puffed up is to be self-focused or, as we would say today, have a “big head.”

6) Love does not behave rudely, that is, it is not ill-mannered or brash. Where there is love, there will be kindness and good manners. A person who loves does not just speak his or her mind but minds his or her speech. Love does not go around hurting others’ feelings. It always uses tact and politeness.

7) Love does not seek its own, an idea that Paul expresses in a slightly different manner in Romans 12:10 and Philippians 2:4. This is being like Jesus in a most basic way: being an other-centered person instead of a self-centered person. Love never demands its rights but seeks its responsibilities toward others. It is not self-centered or self-assertive.

8) Love is not easily provoked. It is neither touchy nor irritable. Love does not fly off the handle. It does not lose its temper. It is not easily exasperated at people.

9) Love thinks no evil. It does not store up the memory or keep an account of any wrong it has received. It forgives the evil that people do to it. It does not carry a grudge. Love does not like to hear about the moral failures of others. It does not get pleasure out of the misfortune of others.

10) Love does not rejoice in iniquity: “I told you so,” and “It serves you right,” do not reflect the language of love. Love desires the best for others and does not derive personal satisfaction from the failure of others.

11) Instead, love rejoices in the truth. Love is happy to hear what is right, no matter how painful. Love rejoices when what is true, correct, and righteous win the day, regardless of

how that may impact it directly.

7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Paul ends the discussion of the characteristics of love on a positive note, summarizing the things that love does. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. The Greek word *pantos* (PAHN-toce), translated “all” can also be interpreted as “always” (1 Corinthians 13:7). Paul’s point is that love never tires of what it does. Most of us do the work of love, but only for a while. The greatness of *agape* is that it keeps on going!

Love “beareth” (Gk. *stego*, STEH-goh) the errors and faults of others. Other translations will say love “protects.” This verb is related to the Greek noun meaning “shield,” which can be viewed from either side of the battle. If you are the attacker, a shield is protecting your target. If you are the defender, a shield is bearing up under the assault.

Love “believeth” the best, trusts in the object of its love, has confidence in him or her, and gives credit that might otherwise not be self-evident except through the eyes of love. Love can bear all things because it believes all things with the special insight that only a loving relationship can bring.

Love “hopeth” with joy, full of confidence in eager expectation that the salvation of the Lord is to come. It bears all things because it believes with only the insight of God, thus it can wait for the true nature of people to be revealed. Love trusts in the eventual reconciliation with God.

Love “endureth” (Gk. *hupomeno*, hoo-po-MEN-oh) and continues to be present; it does not perish or depart in spite of errors, faults, or wrongs done. The verb carries the image of “remaining or abiding under” hardship. Love is not going anywhere; it will endure.

8 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.

The verse begins Paul’s conclusion on the topic of love. He has been addressing the overemphasis of the Corinthian Christians on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Here, Paul attests to the permanence of love as he continues to put the spiritual gifts and virtues in perspective.

Love is eternal; it never comes to an end. It is permanent. Whereas all the gifts in which the Corinthians pride themselves are transitory at best, love is transcendent. The gifts were given by the Spirit as instruments to be used in this age. Paul anticipates that these gifts will no longer be needed when the next age occurs, marked by the return of Christ and fulfillment of the reign of God. Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will pass away with the old age. Love, on the other hand, is essential and will never pass away.

9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

Love, like God, is complete. On the other hand, we are imperfect creatures who can only comprehend reality—both material and spiritual—in an incomplete manner. Therefore, we can only preach or prophesy in an imperfect and partial way. For Paul, the kingdom of God is near, but not yet. It is not fully revealed in this age, so our knowledge and prophecy of it can only be partial.

The “perfect” (Gk. teleios, TEH-lay-ose) maturity or completeness will come with the end of this present, imperfect age and the beginning of the new, perfect age. Paul describes the times the Corinthians live in as transitory. Thus they should not make gods or idols out of the gifts they esteem so highly.

11 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. 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.

Paul poses a metaphor of the maturing spiritual human being who grows from childhood to adulthood. Paul, who had called the Corinthians “babes in Christ,” chides them once again to grow up and put away the trappings of childhood, in this case, using their gifts for the wrong reasons (3:1). It is wrong to suggest that verses 11–12 see tongue-speaking and prophecy as childishness, particularly considering Paul, himself, claims to do both. What Paul is saying is that there is an appropriate age to do so and that now is that age. When the completion of that age finally arrives, then it will be time to set aside what was appropriate and needful for that age.

The word translated as glass (Gk. esoptron, eh-SOHP-trone) is another word for mirror. Mirrors were a primary industry in the city of Corinth. Mirrors made in Corinth were finely polished silver or bronze. The image was often concave and distorted, much like today’s amusement park house of mirrors. Thus, we see only dimly through the distorted reflections of our own limited understanding. However, when Jesus returns and makes His dwelling place among His people, we will see Him face to face (cf. Revelation 21:22–23). We not only come to know, but we will also be known.

13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

After everything has been said, we come to the conclusion of the matter. Spiritual gifts are given for a particular purpose, and for a particular time. It is childish to esteem them too highly. We, like the Corinthian Christians, must remember that giftedness is not the measure of maturity. The display of love is.

It is by faith that we are saved according to the grace of God. In hope, we wait upon the return of Jesus and the coming of the reign of God. All this is due to God’s love for us. These are what remain when one matures in Christ.

However, when Jesus returns, the reign of God is fulfilled. We have no need for hope when we stand face-to-face with God. When we clearly see all that there is to see, then we will have no need for faith. Yet we will continue to love and be loved by God. Love never ends. It is eternal and the greatest gift of God.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday

Love and the Knowledge of God
(Hosea 6:1–6)

Tuesday

Abounding in Steadfast Love
(Jonah 3:10–4:11)

Wednesday

Guided by the Spirit
(Galatians 5:19–26)

Thursday

Increasing Love for One Another
(2 Thessalonians 1:1–5)

Friday

Love and Steadfastness
(2 Thessalonians 3:1–5)

Saturday

Filled with the Fullness of God
(Ephesians 3:14–21)

Sunday

Love Never Ends
(1 Corinthians 13)