

1 Corinthians 13 – “What Is Love?”

We come to one of the more beloved chapters in the Bible – the Love Chapter! You’ve all been waiting for this. And it’s true that it’s a glorious, beautiful chapter, one that we use at weddings to really set the stage for what that new relationship should reflect, but Paul shared this chapter to put some people in their place. You see, we can often times separate chapter 13 from chapters 12 and 14 and think perhaps that Paul just needed a break in his correction of the church at Corinth. Some think Paul was sharing this to ease the pain and cut the tension of what he’s been speaking about.

But Chapter 13 is no parenthetical break, it very much ties in with his whole argument and teaching on the gifts.

Remember, we ended chapter 12 with this verse: ***But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.***

The excellent way is what get into in Chapter 13, and that excellent way is LOVE!

Chapter 12 is the ***Example of Gifts***.

Chapter 14 is the ***Exercise of Gifts***.

Whereas Chapter 13 is the ***Expression of Gifts***. How are these gifts to be used, and what’s the motivation behind them? We’ll look at these things as we go through Chapter 13.

Outline:

1. The Importance of Love – 13:1-3
2. The Impeccability of Love – 13:4-7
3. The Invincibility of Love – 13:8-13

1. The Importance Of Love – 13:1-3

13:1 - *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.*

Paul’s going to give 5 specific examples of different gifts to demonstrate how these gifts fall short if not exercised with love. And as he does he makes a series of exaggerated comparisons with extreme examples of each.

Paul begins with the gift of speaking in tongues.

- Again, this was most likely the gift that many in the Corinthian church were striving for and exercising. They saw this gift as an opportunity to show off their spirituality. Remember, it was all about them.

Even if a person spoke in a tongue of men (which was a known language in the world, but unknown to the speaker) but did not have love, it lost its effect.

You could even speak with the tongues of angels... Now what is that exactly? Some have speculated that this was a heavenly language, an unknown language. But again, Paul is using hyperbole here to make a point. You could do something so extreme, like speak with the tongues of angels, but if there's no love driving that it just comes across as a bunch of noise.

- How many of you have been really excited to have a child pick up a tuba or trombone for the school band? You're like, honey better invest in some ear plugs here. You know you're going to be in for some trying days before you get to the good days.
- Or clanging cymbals. You don't want to be the person sitting in front of that guy during the performance.

All of these things that Paul points out is being used to show what things are like without love. These gifts meant to bless become harsh, jolting, and most likely gives you a headache. That's not the intent or purpose of the gifts.

Now speaking of our words not doing justice, another example of this is our English word love. I love chocolate, I love my kids, I love my wife. Now I'm saying the same thing about each of these subjects, but I certainly hope that the way I feel about chocolate is not the same way I feel about my wife! We have one word for love; whereas the Greeks had 4 different words for which we translate love.

Eros – this spoke of a physical, sensual kind of love. Where we get our word erotic. Hollywood likes to glorify this type of love.

Storge – this spoke of a family kind of love. The love shared between a child and their parents or other family members.

Phileo – This spoke of a brotherly kind of love. The city of Philadelphia is named from this word. It is a love shared between close friends. It's a love that is reciprocal, a give and take kind of love.

Agapē – This is the highest form of love. It's the kind of love demonstrated by Jesus. It's a love that is not based on feelings or emotions or what you can get out of it. **Romans 5:8**, *"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* It's a giving love, an unconditional

love. It's this agape love that lifts love to the highest degree, independent of what another does or how you feel. It's sacrificial and giving. It causes us to think of others beyond ourselves. It's a love that chooses to love.

- This agapē love was not a word used often by the secular Greek writers. Paul and the New Testament writers began to use it regularly as it defined God's action of sending His Son into the world to give Himself for the salvation of many.

When Paul says that he's going to show them **a more excellent way**, it's more excellent because love would steer the gifts to their rightful intended outcome – which was to be used for others and to build up the church.

And notice, he doesn't say, I'm going to show you a more excellent *gift* – it's a more excellent **way**. This was to be something that all Christians were to experience and exercise.

This is the very fruit of the Spirit:

- **Galatians 5:22**, *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,"*
- And it's not fruit *plural*, it's fruit *singular*! This is more accurately seen as the fruit of the Spirit is love! And love is characterized by joy, peace, longsuffering, etc...

Everyone wants gifts. Who wouldn't? Gifts are impressive, they're spiritual, but fruit? That can be kind of boring and unimpressive. It sometimes takes a long time to grow. But this love is the more excellent way as it was to unite the church together as one and have them serving one another, rather than showing off in front of one another.

13:2 - 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, but have not love, I am nothing.

Again, making a case through exaggeration. You could have the gift of prophecy and have all knowledge (which of course nobody but Jesus has), but if you don't have love, it's nothing.

You could have the gift of faith to the extreme degree of moving a mountain, but if it's not backed with love, it's no good.

You could be a spiritual superstar outwardly, but if you don't have love inwardly, you're nothing! Everything for the believer should be motivated by love.

13:3 - *And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.*

The gift of giving is mentioned here. Again, this agapē love is a sacrificial love, it's a giving love. You can put on a show of sacrifice yet still be lacking love. If the act is causing you to boast, it's not love and you profit nothing.

- **Matthew 6:1–2**, *“Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.”*

Perhaps this last example is a gift that isn't fully defined biblically, but Paul alludes to being a martyr. I mean, how incredible would that be for a person to literally allow themselves to be killed for the sake of the gospel. But if there's no love driving it, once again it falls flat.

- You could have a person going to the stake to be burned and they could be yelling out, *that person over there ratted me out! I'm so angry at them right now!*
- Again, you kind of lose some of that blessing of being an example of Jesus by taking that time to rail on all the people that annoyed you in your life.

2. The Impeccability of Love – 13:4-7

13:4-6 - *Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; ⁵ does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; ⁶ does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth;*

Here we see the characteristics of love. Paul will list 15 of them:

Suffers long: Many may feel like they suffer long, but this is the idea of longsuffering or patience. It is the ability to endure through tough trials or prickly people. Our immediate reaction at times when people hurt us is to retaliate, but love will produce patience. God has been longsuffering with us. That's why His return delays. I think, Lord stop waiting for these people they don't deserve Your grace. Yet out of love He waits, He's patient, not wanting any to perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Kind: We can be patient, yet unkind. We could say, *You weren't very fair to me, and I should really just not be your friend anymore, but I'm going to walk in love*

instead. Now that's not showing kindness. That's not reflecting real love. It's easy to be kind when others are kind to you. But are you kind still when it's not reciprocated? **Ephesians 4:32**, *"And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you."*

Does not envy: Love does not cause someone to be jealous. What does envy do? It causes someone to be upset over another person's fortune or blessing. Love rather causes a person to put others before themselves.

Does not parade itself: A person who is out promoting himself or boasting in himself is not walking in love. In fact, many would think the opposite of love would be hate. The opposite of love is actually self. True love is a dying of self. When you have a person who is completely caught up in self, you will see an absence of love.

Is not puffed up: A person who is walking in love will not be proud or prideful. *'Look how loving I am'*. Again, that's just promoting or puffing up self. Love is to build up. In 8:1 Paul said, *'Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies (builds up).'*

Does not behave rudely: Now this idea of rude can mean many different things to different people. But it's the idea of behaving in an improper manner. The Corinthians were getting drunk at the agape feast and cutting in line. They weren't displaying love but were rather behaving rudely.

Does not seek its own: Again, this is looking out for others, not self.

Philippians 2:4, *"Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."*

Is not provoked: Now a good test for this is to just drive in rush hour traffic. You get some guy cutting you off, and you quickly will find out if you're walking in love or not. Some guys just get so easily provoked and upset, and it's wrong. In fact, Moses was left off the Promised Land roster because he became provoked by the people and misrepresented the heart of God.

Thinks no evil: the NIV says, *'keeps no record of wrongs'*. I like that translation. How many times we like to bring up past faults of others in order to make our case more powerful. If you're married I'm sure you've encountered that. But true love is not keeping tabs. Peter thinking he was becoming quite spiritual asked how much should he forgive a person – 7 times? Things were normally done in three's, (strike 3 you're out). So he probably thought Jesus would be so impressed with him going well beyond three. Yet Jesus said seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22). In other words, don't keep count.

Does not rejoice in iniquity: Let's say there's a guy who's been causing a lot of grief in your life, and his house burns down. Do you secretly rejoice or relish in that tragedy?

Rejoices in the truth: Sometimes truth hurts because it reveals areas in our lives that need work. But we can rejoice in that truth knowing that God is doing a further work in our lives. Love will receive and rejoice in that truth rather than repel it.

13:7 - *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

These are some serious challenges here. We can all be those that bear with some things, or endure some things, but Paul says we are to bear, believe, hope, and endure all things!

Bears all things: Love doesn't grow tired; it keeps protecting and bearing.

Believes all things: Love doesn't become critical or pessimistic.

Hopes all things: Love doesn't give up, even when things go bad. It keeps hoping for the best.

Endures all things: Love will keep pressing forward even when the storms rage.

You can take all these characteristics and replace the word *love* with *Jesus*, and you will see how perfect Jesus is. He truly is love!

But then replace the word *love* with your name. A little different conclusion huh?

But this is how God wants each of us to live our lives, and this is a great gauge to see how much room we have to grow in becoming like Jesus.

3. The Invincibility of Love – 13:8-13

13:8 - *Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.*

Love never fails. Prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will one day fade away. There will come a day when gifts are no longer needed, but love will remain!

13:9-10 - *For we know in part and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰ But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.*

We don't know everything right now – *we know in part*. Not even prophecy reveals all things for us at this time. But a day is coming when we will have all things in full – *when that which is perfect has come*. Because it's at that point that

these gifts will be done away with. Paul speaks of a development or a change that takes place...

13:11-12 - *When I was a child, I spoke 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 in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.*

Gifts are given to help us grow to maturity; to equip the body of Christ. But when we grow and mature we no longer need those developing things.

When does this transition take place to when we no longer need the gifts? I believe it's when we enter into eternity! Either through the Lord coming back for His church, or us passing on into eternity.

- Some would like to say ***that which is perfect*** speaks of the canonization of the New Testament. That the gifts were given for the Apostles as a sign of authority. And now that we have the Word of God in completion, these gifts have ceased. But that view doesn't fit with this passage.
- Paul says we see in a mirror dimly. In this day, they didn't have the nice mirrors as we have. They would polish up metal so that you could see a reflection, but it was dim and blurred at best. But one day we're going to stand before the Lord face to face.
- **1 John 3:2**, *"Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."*

It can't be the Word for then we would know all right now: but then I shall know just as I also am known. This is speaking of knowing just as the Lord knows us. Which is perfectly and completely. But presently we don't know all, even with the complete Word of God. You see the Word doesn't tell us all there is to know, it tells us all we need to know.

Paul is speaking of how when we are in heaven, we will be complete. We will no longer have the need for the gifts of the Spirit. Just as when a child grows up, he doesn't need the things that use to preoccupy his time. He puts them away. So to, as we enter eternity, we will lay aside those things that were needed for our stay here on earth, but aren't needed in heaven.

13:13 - *And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

These are all necessary qualities needed on this journey. Even more so than the gifts. It took faith to come to the Lord, and we continue to walk in faith and by faith each and every day. I trust that hope is a part of your life. Without hope we just shrivel up into mediocrity and mundaneness. And we've already seen the importance of love. This should certainly characterize the believer. And the Word is very clear on the relationship and importance of these three:

- **1 Thessalonians 5:8**, *"But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation."*
- **Colossians 1:4-5**, *"since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; ⁵ because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel,"*
- **1 Thessalonians 1:3**, *"Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father."*

But the greatest of these is love. Was Paul just naming a favourite of his? Why is love better? Because only love lasts forever. Faith isn't needed any longer when we see Jesus face to face. We're no longer needing to be hopeful when we're in heaven. But love will continue to grow through eternity.

We can find ourselves doing much for the Lord, and exercising these gifts often, but if we're not doing it in love, or motivated by love, it will lose it's worth.