

THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL

SERIES: LIFESTYLE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

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Many people consider 1 Corinthians 13 the most beautiful piece of literature in the New Testament. It's certainly the most beloved. Most couples want to have at least a portion of the chapter read at their weddings. It has often been set to music because of its poetic qualities. There is value in all of those things, and I often teach on the heart of this chapter at Christian weddings.

But this chapter can very easily be torn out of its context between chapters 12 and 14 of 1 Corinthians. It can become a hymn to romantic love or a sentimental sermon on Christian brotherhood that isn't really rooted in Biblical reality. We'll be saved from that sort of misinterpretation or misapplication if we keep in mind that chapter 13 is in the flow of Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts. Paul writes at the end of chapter 12, "But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way." At the beginning of chapter 14 he says, "Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts...."

In chapter 13 Paul is dealing with the problem of lovelessness in the Corinthian church. They struggled with the abuse of spiritual gifts, division in the church, envy of other people's gifts, selfishness (remember the lawsuits they were bringing against each other as brothers and sisters), impatience with one another at public meetings, and disgraceful behavior that dishonored the Lord himself when they came to celebrate communion. What we're going to learn from this chapter is that the only way spiritual gifts can be expressed creatively, effectively, and joyfully is when Christians are motivated by love.

As I've said earlier in our studies, God's word is both consistent and insistent on the way in which spiritual gifts are to be expressed. In 1 Corinthians 12:31, after his discussion of gifts, Paul says, "I will show you a more excellent way," and that way is love. In Romans 12:9, right after the discussion of gifts, he says, "Let love be without hypocrisy." In Ephesians 4:15,16 he talks about speaking the truth in love and about building in love. The apostle Peter, in his general discussion of spiritual gifts, says, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another" (1 Peter 4:8).

1 Corinthians 13 divides into three sections. In verses 1-3 Paul focuses on the ultimate importance of love in the life of the body. In verses 4-7 he talks about the practice of love, or love expressed as an activity. Finally in verses 8-13 he talks about the permanence of love.

LOVELESS GOOD DEEDS AMOUNT TO NOTHING

Let's look at verses 1-3. This section makes very clear that using spiritual gifts, doing good deeds to people, or even becoming a martyr for the sake of the gospel has no ultimate value unless it's motivated by love. Love is the context in which these gifts and deeds gain significance.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Now, the love that is defined throughout the chapter is the word *agape*. It's a unique word that the

Christian community in the first century adapted for their own specific use. First of all, it defines God's supernatural love. It's the way that God views us and acts toward us. God expressed a deep concern for our well-being when he sent Jesus Christ to die for us. He showed in the cross that in love he was willing to go all-out for our sakes. God's love is a love of intelligent purpose and unqualified acceptance. It spares no expense for the good of the beloved. It is active on our behalf.

Now, as we express that love through our own lives, it means that we make deliberate commitments of the whole person, but it especially involves our mind and our will. Love is not just an emotional response. Our *agape* love, like God's, is intelligent and purposeful. It's not passive; it involves making decisions that commit us to a policy or a course of action that is not dictated by emotions. It's a commitment to act for the highest good of the other, whether that person deserves it or not, whether they respond to us or not. Exercising love can be wonderfully accompanied by all kinds of warm feelings, or it can be a victory over negative feelings.

There are two other Greek words in the first-century vocabulary of love. They were common in Corinthian culture, and we still see them at work in our language today. The word *phileo* means affection, brotherly love, friendship, or warmth. It's a wonderful gift from the Lord, but it is a conditional kind of love. You could call it the "if" kind of love: "If you're nice to me, if we share things in common, if you please me, if you love me...then I will love you."

The word *eros* refers to another great gift from the Lord: physical love, chemistry, sensual attraction to somebody else. But again it's a conditional kind of love. You could call it the "because" kind of love: "Because you're so handsome or beautiful, because you're so wonderful to me, because you give me physical pleasure...I will love you."

Agape love stands in stark contrast to *phileo* and *eros* because it's unconditional. You could call it the "in spite of" kind of love: "In spite of your faults and failures, in spite of your inconsistencies and hypocrisies, whatever you're like, I choose to love you." It's the only kind of love that remains steadfast, that has any real, lasting value in human relationships.

Now let's look more closely at these three verses. This kind of *agape* love is absolutely necessary. Paul reviews some of the spiritual gifts that we looked at from chapter 12 and shows their emptiness apart from love. Verse 1 speaks of eloquent communication, but Paul says without love it's nothing. If the gift of tongues is exercised without the motivation of *agape*, this expression of worship and praise to God is reduced to little more than an empty pagan ritual. Even the most gifted Christian orator, who is positively angelic in his powers of communication, will be spiritually superficial apart from the power of love at work through his eloquence.

In most of the pagan temples in Corinth, there would be large gongs or cymbals hanging at the entrance, and as the worshipers came in they would bang them to attract the attention of the gods so the gods could respond to them. Paul's point in using this illustration, which would have been familiar to the Corinthians, is that the most exemplary expression of the gift of tongues, the most moving Christian eloquence, without love, is nothing more than an empty pagan rite. Communication without love is a useless thing no matter how effective the communicator.

Verse 2 tells us that knowledge and power without love are nothing. He mentions three more spiritual gifts from chapter 12: prophecy, knowledge, and faith. Remember, we saw that prophecy is a speaking gift. This is a strong challenge to anyone who tries to deal with the Scriptures as a Biblical scholar or theologian or teacher or preacher, because it reminds us that the power behind what we do is the motivation for doing it, and if we're driven by self-interest, the desire for praise or promotion or advantage of any sort, then our influence for the Lord as teachers is going to be undercut to that extent, no matter how orthodox we are, how persuasive we are, how relevant our words. Even the important gift of faith or vision that Paul mentions must be controlled by love for other people. If I'm difficult, cantankerous, or hard to get along with, even though I can move mountains by faith in God's wonder-working ability, exercising that gift is an absolute zero from God's perspective.

He goes on to talk about giving in verse 3. Sacrifice to the point of martyrdom, without love, is nothing.

That opening phrase, "And if I give all my possessions...." may be a reference to the spiritual gift of giving that Paul mentions in Romans 12. The Jews prized the giving of alms to the poor as a religious act, and the early Christians picked up the idea. So this challenge to the believers in Corinth must have been a severe blow to those who were all puffed up about their generous alms-giving, but who didn't love one another. Paul also makes the point that even martyrdom without love is of no value. It's interesting that when persecution came into the early church in the next century, some believers actually sought martyrdom as a way of becoming famous or of gaining some sort of special heavenly credit. But again, when sacrifice of any kind is motivated by self-interest and pride, it loses its spiritual value.

I've been in ministry for many years now, in churches and para-church ministries, and I can think of different times when I have seen the absence of love negate the effectiveness of the expression of spiritual gifts. I spent a number of years on the program staff at Mount Hermon Christian Conference Center, and I saw and heard many famous Bible teachers, preachers, authors, and media personalities on the platform at Mount Hermon. When you spend a week with a person, as I would in hosting them, you can measure the relationship between the platform persona and what the person is like in real life.

I remember one man, who is with the Lord now, who was very-well known. He pastored big churches and wrote prolifically. I've used his commentaries on the Bible through the years. He was an eloquent speaker with encyclopedic Biblical knowledge. Yet there was an edge to him, an undercurrent of anger in his teaching. Every week at family camps we would have the conferees evaluate what they liked and didn't like, and we were all surprised at the negative response people had to this very famous Bible teacher and scholar. There was about him an impersonality as well. The entire week he was there he called me "brother," never once "Doug." I finally said to him on Friday, "You call me 'brother' because you don't know my name, do you?" With a start he said, "Well, I meet a lot of people." The point is, a speaker can proclaim God's word with great eloquence, but without love for the person, the proclamation becomes an empty gesture.

In contrast, I've seen how the presence of love both enhances all the other gifts and even makes up for inadequacies. I think of a dear brother I worked with many years ago who was not particularly outstanding as a scholar or a Bible teacher and was not even a very good communicator, but people respected his leadership and God blessed his ministry for two reasons: People knew that he was not the least bit self-serving in anything that he asked of them, and they knew that he really loved them, collectively as a body and individually as well.

HOW LOVE BEHAVES

Now in verses 4-7 Paul turns to a description of love. He tells us what love does and doesn't do, and he defines love in terms of both its attitudes and its actions. There are fifteen succinct phrases in which Paul summarizes this principle of relating to other people, and if you put them all together, it's dynamite! It will absolutely transform human relationships and the world around us. In the Greek, all fifteen of these are verb phrases, but that doesn't always come through clearly in English.

Verse 4 summarizes how unselfish love is:

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant....

Patience means being long-suffering, being self-controlled even under provocation, bearing pains and trials without complaining about it. It's used exclusively in the New Testament of being patient with people. It's the way that God is patient with us. God is accepting and merciful; he is not intolerant of us. That's what our calling is in dealing with shortcomings in other people.

Love is kind, and kindness is not just a feeling. Kind people are easy to take, not harsh. But the verb itself speaks of activity, active good will, being useful for somebody else's good, always trying to do what is helpful to the other person, even if it involves sacrifice. In Romans 2:4 Paul said it was the kindness of

God exercised toward us that led us to salvation, and our love toward people will act just as purposefully and consistently.

Love is not jealous. Jealousy or envy is resenting another person because of what they have or how they have succeeded. Envy possessively wants what somebody else has. Love, in contrast, is glad for somebody who is popular or successful or beautiful or talented.

Love doesn't brag or boast. The derivative of this word is interesting. It means to blow something, to be like a windbag or a blowhard. When the loving person is successful, they're not going to brag about it or vaunt their own worth. They're not going to do a good, kind, generous thing and then spoil it with boasting about how thoughtful they were. They're not going to demand payment in praise for the kindness that they extended.

I realized early this morning that I blew that big-time yesterday. I spent the last two days working in the yard, sort of catching up with El Niño, doing hedges and flower beds. I worked really hard. Then I came in yesterday about noon and said, "Doesn't the yard look great?" That was boasting.

The other thing that struck me is that most of us are really irritated by boasting in other people, but we're rather oblivious to it in ourselves. We think it's a strong self-image or something. But love doesn't boast.

Love isn't arrogant. This word is similar to the word for bragging. It means to be inflated or puffed-up. The arrogant person is disposed to claim for themselves more than is their due. They delight in lording it over other people, always having to be right in a conversation or argument. Paul already named this as a besetting sin of the Corinthian Christians in chapter 4. They were conceited about their knowledge of doctrine, their spiritual gifts, and the famous teachers they had. Love is never taken with its own importance. Somebody wrote that arrogance is big-headed, but love is big-hearted.

Now verses 5-6 summarize the behavior of love.

[Love] does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth....

The idea of acting unbecomingly or rudely, at the beginning of verse 5, means love doesn't have poor manners or act indecently. Paul would say that rudeness toward people is loveless. It doesn't care enough for those it's around to act courteously. It cares nothing for the feelings, rights, or sensitivities of other people, so the loveless person is careless and overbearing and often crude. William Barclay translated this little phrase, "Love does not behave gracelessly." So love is gracious to everyone with whom it comes in contact.

Love does not seek its own, or insist on its own way. That means that love is not stubborn, obstinate, possessive, demanding, or self-serving. Love has no desire to dominate anybody. Love is preoccupied with the good of the other.

Love is not provoked. This means it's not easily aroused to anger. We would say love is not quick-tempered, convulsive, given to sudden emotional outbursts, easily upset, exasperated by petty annoyances, or prone to flaring up at the slightest provocation. Love is not touchy; you're not walking on eggshells around love.

Love doesn't take into account a wrong suffered; it isn't resentful. "Take into account" is a bookkeeping term. It means to calculate something, as when entering numbers into a journal or a ledger. It's to keep a permanent financial record. That's good practice in business, but in human relationships that's a bad thing. It's very destructive to keep records of imagined or real slights against us, because it means we end up living with indignation toward other people, holding a grudge, feeling victimized by an affront or personal injury. We must remember that God does not view us this way. God is not a record-keeping God. And love won't keep records against other people. It never evaluates people that way.

Verse 6 has two phrases that have opposite meanings. First, love "does not rejoice in unrighteousness," or literally in "injustice." It means that love never takes satisfaction from sin or gloat over another's sinful misfortune. It will never feel superior when it hears about the inadequacies, blunders, or failures of somebody else, and love will never tear somebody down by telling a third party of their sinful failure. In contrast, love rejoices with the truth. If rejoicing in unrighteousness tears people down, then rejoicing in the truth builds people up. Love is glad when truth prevails, it rejoices in the spiritual triumphs of other people, it reports the good things that people do, it encourages other people with stories of truth.

In verse 7 there's a wonderful summary of how optimistic love is:

[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

That word "bears" or "bears up" means to cover over or to support. It was used both of the foundations that held a building up and also of the supports that held the roof up. It means the person in between is protected and secure. That's what love tries to do. The apostle Peter wrote, "...Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Love is protective of other people's reputations; it protects them from exposure to ridicule or harm or accusation. Genuine love doesn't gossip, and it won't listen to gossip or pass gossip along.

Love believes all things. This is not gullibility or naiveté, it's godly objectivity in looking at people. It's willingness to give people the benefit of the doubt, to start over with a clean slate of trust when somebody has fouled up. To believe the best of other people is to believe all things.

Love hopes all things. This describes godly optimism, never giving up hope but living with expectant confidence because, as long as God's grace is operative, and we believe that he is alive and well in our world today, human failure is never final. The apostle Peter experienced that after he had denied the Lord Jesus with a curse at the trial. After the resurrection, God, who would not take that failure as final, painted that beautiful picture of reconciliation when Jesus met Simon Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that morning for breakfast (John 21), and there restored him with the gracious invitation, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" drawing him back into relationship. I've had to say to myself many times about friendships with people and about my own children, in the midst of pain over failure and disappointment, "The story isn't over yet. God isn't finished." Love doesn't give up hope.

Finally, love endures all things. Literally that means to stay under pressure. It's a military term that means to hold a position at all costs, even unto death, whatever it takes. So love holds fast to people it loves. It perseveres. It never gives up on anyone. Love won't stop loving, even in the face of rejection.

That's why in Paul's logic, the very next phrase in verse 8 is, "Love never fails." We saw love most clearly in Jesus' dying breath on the cross, when he said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). That's how love endures all things.

Now, if we step back and look at an overview of these fifteen verbs, it's clear that they don't describe a natural human kind of love. I said before this is the love that was defined by God's gift of himself in Jesus Christ. If you go back through verses 4-7, and everywhere you find the word "love," substitute the word "Christ," all these statements will still be true. The kind of love being described is love that has its source in God, and as we look at each of the phrases it becomes obvious that we're defining a lifestyle that really is beyond our human reach. It is absolutely impossible unless the Spirit of God dwells within us and empowers us. When I hold this list of characteristics up in front of me to evaluate my life, it can be tremendously condemning, until I remember that God is committed to perfecting in me this love that he calls from me. He is the source of it. God is not asking us to do things that are humanly impossible, because he will give to us the very life of Christ that is so beautifully demonstrated in all of these attributes of love. God wants me to grow in my love for people, not in a theoretical, abstract, theological sense, but when they're right there in front of me.

THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE

Now in verses 8-13, after having described love, Paul again goes back and contrasts love with spiritual gifts. This time he focuses on the permanent quality of *agape* love in contrast to the transitory nature of

spiritual gifts. Paul says that spiritual gifts are temporary, incomplete, elementary. Look at verse 8, where he talks about the temporary nature of gifts:

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.

Love never fails or ceases in the sense that it functions both now and in eternity. It will never outlive its usefulness or cease to be valuable. It will never be abolished. Love can't fail because God is love, and God can't fail. Love has a divine quality about it. God's very nature is love, and eternity is God's sphere of existence.

By contrast, as important as the spiritual gifts like prophecy, tongues, and knowledge are, we're going to have no more need of them in heaven. In that eternal day all prophecy will be finally fulfilled. The expression of praise to God with unknown tongues will no longer be needed. All knowledge about God will finally be fully disclosed. So spiritual gifts would be redundant in heaven.

Paul goes on to say in verses 9-10 that spiritual gifts are incomplete:

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

Again, each of the spiritual gifts that Paul summarizes in Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Corinthians 12 offers only a partial revelation of God. It's vital in this present age, but unnecessary in the age to come. At best, our understanding about God is incomplete until we get to heaven. When we get to the perfection of our eternal state, we won't need any of our spiritual gifts. We won't even need the Bible in heaven, because we'll be eternally in the presence, in full comprehension, of the living Word himself, Jesus Christ.

Then Paul says in verses 11-12 that spiritual gifts are elementary:

When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I have been fully known.

The contrast is between this age when we are still children, and the age to come when we get to heaven and we're finally grown up, perfected, completed, fully matured. When we're children we need the gifts of the Spirit, but when Christ comes in the fullness of his glory, the gifts will be put away just as certain toys are put away when children outgrow them.

My father is almost eighty years old now, and we have an adult relationship. He is my dad, but we're brothers and dear friends in Christ. We have great talks about the things of the Spirit and about the Scriptures.

Verse 12 gives another analogy, which is really closely connected. The application is great. It contrasts the indirect nature of looking at somebody's reflection in a mirror as opposed to seeing them face-to-face. Corinth was famous for its mirrors. They made the best mirrors in the ancient world. They were made from polished bronze, not glass. If you were looking in a bronze mirror and somebody was standing behind you and looking over your shoulder at you, it would be a fuzzy, distorted, indirect image that would be far inferior to turning around and looking at them face-to-face. Our present vision of the Lord Jesus, as great as it is through the lens of the Scriptures, mediated by the gifts of the Spirit, is nothing compared to really seeing him. In our own time, a comparable metaphor would be the difference between seeing a photograph and seeing someone in person. As good as a picture is, it's simply not the real thing.

When I was born, my father was fighting in the European theater in the World War II. I didn't meet him until I was eighteen months old. But every day of my life for the first eighteen months, my mother talked about my father to me. She read every letter to me that my father wrote to her from Europe. She read me her letters to him before she sent them. And central to all of that was a picture of my father. It was a formal

Army portrait of him in full dress uniform. He was a handsome man, and he looked terrific in his uniform. My mother had it enlarged and framed it, and she kept it on the table at the end of my crib in my room. So I heard all about my father, and I had this picture, and my mother says I would kiss the picture and hug it, because she kissed and hugged it.

When I was eighteen months old, my father came home in the middle of the night. He came into my room and turned the light on. There was my father in his military uniform. My mother said that I stood up in bed, looked at him, walked to the end of the crib and got the picture, looked at the picture, looked over at him, put the picture down, went back to him, and held up my arms. And my father picked me up and held me. As great as the picture and the stories and the letters had been, they didn't compare to the reality.

That's what it's going to be like when we see Jesus. As great as this life is, as much as we're blessed and helped by all the resources God has given us, it is nothing compared to what we have to look forward to when we see Jesus face-to-face.

Look at the wonderful promise in the final word. We should probably tie it to the phrase in verse 8, "Love never fails...." Verse 13:

But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Again, as good as the spiritual gifts are, they're only for the present. Christian love, with which the Corinthian church struggled, is the more excellent way, in part because it belongs to eternity as well as to the present. Our gifts and our ministries, and even faith in the Lord through Christ and the hope that he has given us, all will one day cease to have purpose or meaning. But in that perfect day, when we see our Lord Jesus face-to-face, fully knowing him and being fully known by him, love will be just the beginning. It's more important now for us to learn to live out love than to have any of the spiritual gifts or any of the other virtues. Love is how we're linked to God eternally.

I was thinking last week when I read those words from verse 8, "Love never fails," that *agape* is eternal, but I'm painfully aware that human affection does fail. Even as I studied for this sermon, I was reminded that there is a day coming when this form of communication will no longer be needed. You won't need anybody to tell you about the Lord; you'll have intimacy with the Lord directly. But when I'm learning to love another person with the same unselfish love that God has poured out on me, then I'm doing something that will never end, because God is love, and he will never end. We live in a world that makes it difficult to keep that straight, because it puts tremendous value on the here-and-now, the transitory, the physical and material reality. Our commitment to this love seems silly to the world around us. But when everything that seems permanent is gone—the buildings that we've built, the vocations, the programs, the budgets, the bureaucracies, everything you can think of—the love of God will be as enduring as ever.

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