

# EXPRESSING OUR GIFTS WITH LOVE

*SERIES: "NOW CONCERNING SPIRITUAL GIFTS..."*

by Ron Ritchie

---

Mother Teresa wrote,

We must grow in love and to do this we must go on loving and loving and giving and giving until it hurts---the way Jesus did. Do ordinary things with extraordinary love: little things like caring for the sick and the homeless, the lonely and the unwanted, washing and cleaning for them. You must give what will cost you something. This, then, is giving not just what you can live without but what you can't live without or don't want to live without, something you really like. Then your gift becomes a sacrifice, which will have value before God. Any sacrifice is useful if it is done out of love. This giving until it hurts---this sacrifice---is also what I call love in action. (1)

At the end of 1 Corinthians 12 Paul turns from defining the body of Christ and the proper use of our spiritual gifts to evaluating our motives in ministry: "And I show you a still more excellent way" (verse 31). This more excellent way is the way of love. The agape love of God can flow through our hearts like a river if, for example, with pure motives we seek opportunities to express our spiritual gifts in the Spirit to one another and to those in need. This is love in action. And this is the challenge Paul wants to put before the Corinthians, where many were expressing their gifts among each other in the flesh.

## **Ministry without love equals nothing!**

1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

The Greeks used the word *philia* to denote tender affection or brotherly love. They used the word *eros* to denote romantic love. But Paul uses the Greek word *agape* to express the essential nature of God, "for God is love" (1 John 4:8). This *agape* or sacrificial love can be known only from the actions it prompts. God is the source of this sacrificial love as expressed in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son...." He did so at great personal sacrifice. And Jesus died for all of us who were (and some of us who still are) dead in our sins. His love moved into our graveyard to announce that if anyone would place their faith in him as their Lord and Savior, they would be raised from the dead and be given eternal life (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Once we have been made alive in him, Jesus tells us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). We are called to respond to God's love by giving him our whole lives, and we are to understand that now by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit we are able to love ourselves, our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, our neighbors, and our enemies by doing good for them (see Luke 6:27-35). The love of God has its perfect expression among men in the Lord Jesus Christ, for the apostle John wrote, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in Him?" (1 John 3:16-17). Christian love is the fruit of his Spirit expressed through our

lives by righteous acts toward others (see 2 Corinthians 5:14; Galatians 5:22).

Now let's examine our text. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." In this immediate situation the Corinthian Christians were being carried away emotionally when they used their spiritual gifts of tongues (known foreign languages) in their worship services. They were speaking out of order and displaying a superior attitude, resulting in self-display, self-edification, and self-gratification. And they were trying to convince the other members that all should speak in tongues. (Paul spoke to that issue in 12:30 when he asked, "Do all speak in tongues?"---the implication being, of course not!) So Paul addresses this serious problem: "Let's say that I could speak in the tongues of men and even of angels. (2) As far as God is concerned, if my heart weren't filled with his love, I would continue to be only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. (3) I would be nothing but noise, metal against metal---with no meaning, no understanding, no interpretation, no revelation, and no edification."

"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." Here Paul addresses the mind, the intellect, "Let's say just for the sake of argument that I have the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and faith. If I could stand before God and his word and have the ability to fathom all his mysteries, and then have all the knowledge of heaven and earth, and live out my life with the faith to move mountains, to believe the possible in the face of apparent impossibility, yet I sought to express those spiritual gifts without the agape love of God, it would mean zero in his sight. I would be nothing." Our gifts are only the instruments God gives us to express his love.

"If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." Paul then addresses the will, "Just for the sake of the argument, let's say I have the spiritual gift of giving, and I give all I possess, all my foodstuffs and property, to the poor. Wouldn't that be a great moment in history and a great model for everyone to follow?"<sup>4,5</sup> But then Paul pushes out the envelope as far as he can and proposes that he surrender his body to the flames. Historically, the Romans did not begin to burn Christians at the stake until late in the reign of Nero (54-68 AD). So Paul may have been thinking of a tomb he had run across in Athens just before he came to Corinth, called the Indian's Tomb, in which lay a man who had burned himself to death in public hoping to make himself immortal.<sup>6</sup> "How about if I went out into the public square and set myself on fire in the name of Jesus and then died? Even that act of ultimate self-sacrifice would be viewed by God and men as of no value if I did it without the love of Christ flowing out of my heart, so that in the end God's children would be edified and encouraged, and God would receive the glory."

In an attempt to arrest the carnal activity of many of the Corinthians, who were expressing their spiritual gifts in the flesh, Paul has sought in these three verses to address their emotions, their minds, and their wills, respectively, by taking what they were trying to do to extremes of impossibility. He wants to show them that no matter how far they take their religious activity, if it originates anywhere but in the love of Jesus Christ in their hearts, it will result in just so much noise, an absolute zero, and will be without any profit on earth or in heaven.

Jesus demonstrated the love of God when he looked over the city of Jerusalem shortly before his death on the cross and cried out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34). Paul himself expressed this same love of God for the Jews who would not bow their knee to Jesus as Messiah: "I speak the truth in Christ---I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit---I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race...." (Romans 9:1-3).

Now the apostle begins to describe agape love in contrast to the Corinthians' lifestyles of impatience, unkindness, jealousy, boasting, arrogance, shamefulness, selfishness, touchiness, harboring grudges over wrongs done, resentfulness, and malice. This next paragraph challenges their loveless religious activity and presents to them God's spectrum of agape love as revealed in his Son Jesus Christ.

## **Definition of love**

1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Paul describes fifteen characteristics of agape love, which are expressed in the Greek as present-tense action verbs. These fifteen characteristics fall into two categories: positive, in which there are seven characteristics, and negative, in which there are eight. These are all gathered up here to help the Corinthians and every generation of Christians up to this present one get a handle on what it means to be like Jesus.

Let's look at the positive category. When we look at the life of our Lord Jesus on earth and as our risen Lord in heaven, we find the following:

1. The love of Jesus is patient. Love is long-suffering; it controls the mind before it gives freedom of expression to action or passion. A man or woman of God who is controlled by the Holy Spirit has a lifestyle of having a long fuse, of being patient toward others within the body of Christ and in the world. Jesus was patient with Martha and Mary when they became confused over the death of their beloved brother Lazarus (see John 11). And our risen Lord continues to show patience to mankind even as they mock his second coming. Each day that he doesn't return gives sinners another day to repent and enter into their salvation (2 Peter 3:9, 15).
2. The love of Jesus is expressed in kindness. He had a lifestyle on earth filled with graciousness and acts of kindness to men, women, and children, saints and sinners. He continues to express that kindness (courtesy) to his children and to the world (1 Peter 1:3-5).
3. The love of Jesus rejoices in the truth. He was and now is light and walks in the light of truth. There is nothing hidden or secret; all is out in the open. He speaks and lives in the light of God his Father. He lives in reality as God defines reality. He was, is, and will always be the Truth (John 14:6).
4. The love of Jesus always protects; it bears all things. He did and still does endure, support, forbear, and cover all things. His death on the cross covered our sins, and now he provides the power necessary to help us grow in our love for him and for each other. He continues to provide forgiveness for our failures. This covering includes discipline when necessary (Hebrews 12:5-13).
5. The love of Jesus always trusts; it believes all things. He puts the best possible interpretation on people's actions. Love is ready to start all relationships on a positive foundation (but it is not gullible). Love trusts the heart, words, and actions of others, and when they fail, love moves in alongside and forgives their sins as God in Christ has forgiven our sins (Ephesians 4:32). We see Jesus living this out in his relationship with Peter just before Peter denied him (Luke 22:31-34).
6. The love of Jesus hopes all things. He eagerly desired and continues to desire good for all those who come in contact with him. After Peter (Simon) denied Jesus at his trial, our risen Lord met him at the Sea of Galilee and prepared a breakfast of forgiveness. Then he checked out this fisherman's heart by asking him, "Simon, do you love me?" In that confrontation Jesus saw the heart of his beloved disciple and asked him to shepherd his flock. He hoped that Peter would be faithful from that day forth, and he was (see John 21:7-17).
7. The love of Jesus always perseveres; it endures all things. During his earthly life and ministry he refused to strike back in times of stress, persecution, and ill-treatment. This aspect of his love is best expressed in 1 Peter 2:22-23:

"He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." Our risen Lord Jesus continues to give us the strength to endure

(hupomeno; to hold on at all costs) regardless of the trials in this life.

Now let's turn to the negative characteristics of self-love, also expressed as present-tense action verbs. These are a matter of choosing not to live out our new life in Christ in the flesh.

1. Jesus is not envious or jealous when his spiritual children are honored or exalted as godly men and women on earth.
2. Jesus does not boast about himself, nor did he boast about himself on earth, but was and still is pleased to glorify his Father (John 6:37-38).
3. Jesus is not proud, arrogant, or puffed up now, nor was he when he ministered on earth. For he said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).
4. Jesus does not act rudely toward others. He did not embarrass others but was courteous to and considerate of all he came in contact with. This was clearly demonstrated when he spoke to the Pharisee Nicodemus and to the adulterous woman at the well in Samaria (see John 3:1-21, 4:5-26). In his resurrection appearances to Peter, Paul, and John he continued to have a sweet spirit and still does toward us even at this moment.
5. Jesus is not self-seeking, and was not of such a mind on earth, as demonstrated by his words: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). In his risen state, Paul tells us, "...he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he 'has put everything under his feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:25-28).
6. Jesus is not easily angered or touchy. He never wore his feelings on his sleeve. He lived and now lives his life in the power of the Holy Spirit. He could truly express righteous anger as he did in the temple when the merchants had turned his Father's house into a den of thieves.
7. Jesus does not keep a record of wrongs. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them...." (2 Corinthians 5:19).
8. Jesus does not rejoice in unrighteousness. He has never rejoiced when men and women created in the image of God chose to live in wickedness and delight in evil. He rejoices in righteousness.

To read this description of agape love in 1 Corinthians 13 is to look into the face and life of Jesus. And our risen Lord's desire is that all of us who love him will be transformed into his image. This transformation began the day we invited Jesus to become our Lord and Savior, and it will continue until we meet him face-to-face. We have been given the Holy Spirit to enable us to choose to want to be more like Jesus, day by day.

First Corinthians 13 is a very helpful chapter for evaluating our spiritual lives as they reflect the life of our Lord. The agape love of God, that self-giving and self-sacrificing love, flows out of his heart into the heart of our Lord Jesus, who then allows that love to flow into our hearts and spill over into the lives of those all around us. God's greatest gift to all of us is agape love, and that love never fails, for it is a permanent gift in light of the spiritual gifts he has given us.

### **Love is the greatest**

1 Corinthians 13:8-13:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we

prophecy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Love never fails, but spiritual gifts will in time pass away. Since the Day of Pentecost in 33 AD, the Holy Spirit was sent by God the Father to empower the followers of Jesus Christ to not only follow him but to express their spiritual gifts within the context of agape love until he come again. In this chapter Paul has been seeking to guide the Corinthians to be thankful for the gifts God has given them. But at the same time he doesn't want them to think so highly of these gifts that they become an end in themselves. Rather, they are the means to a wonderful end: the glory of Jesus Christ and God the Father (see 1 Peter 4:11).

Paul then addresses the Corinthians' favorite gifts: "...Prophecies...will cease...." It is wonderful that God has given to men and women in his church the spiritual gift of prophecy. It brings great spiritual growth to the body of Christ when used in the Spirit. But it is important to understand that one day that gift will cease. "...Tongues...will be stilled...." The spiritual gift of tongues was very important in the early church, for it was used of God as a sign to unbelieving Jews that God was moving against them in judgment and moving out to bring salvation to the Gentiles. But a day is coming when this wonderful gift will simply be stilled. "...Knowledge...will pass away." The spiritual gift of knowledge was a much-needed grace for the new church in Corinth. It broke open the many mysteries of God's word, especially as it related to the Gentiles. But a day is coming when this wonderful gift will simply pass away.

"For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears." This has a two-fold meaning: (1) Right now we are struggling to express our spiritual gifts with agape love. We are in a state of imperfection. But as we grow in our relationship with Jesus and he becomes more and more our Lord in every area of our lives, we will find ourselves becoming more concerned about expressing the love of God toward others than about just using our gifts. Spiritual gifts are but a means God uses to express his love through us. The perfection (agape) will cause the imperfect (spiritual gifts) to disappear. (2) The second coming of Jesus Christ will also cause the need for spiritual gifts to disappear. Paul illustrates these spiritual realities with earthly illustrations of the physical and intellectual growth of a child and of looking into a dim mirror, with the hope that one day we will see our Lord face-to-face and finally get to know him fully as he already knows us fully.

When all is said and done on this earth, "...now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." There is more good news: Although spiritual gifts will pass away, we will all continue to experience the "fruit of the Spirit," the character of Christ Jesus. Faith is the belief in invisible realities, and we will spend eternity trusting in him for all the resources necessary to serve him and each other. Throughout eternity we will continue to hope, to believe that more is yet to come. This was so clearly stated by Peter to the Christians in western Turkey when he wrote, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:3-5). And finally, throughout eternity, we will continue to love. God is love, and to learn to love is to finally experience godliness or Christlikeness.

"But the greatest of these is love." So make self-sacrificing love, agape love, the aim of your life. The expression of this love is the purpose for which you are given your gifts, as you depend on the Spirit of God to set you free to love him and his Son Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit of God is love, a love that will spill over into the lives of others all around you, including your enemies. Pursue love, make it your chief goal. To become a person filled with the compassion of God is one of the purposes for our existence here on earth and into eternity.

We must grow in love and to do this we must go on loving and loving and giving and giving until it hurts---the way Jesus did. Do ordinary things with extraordinary love: little things like caring for the sick and the

homeless, the lonely and the unwanted, washing and cleaning for them. You must give what will cost you something. This, then, is giving not just what you can live without but what you can't live without or don't want to live without, something you really like. Then your gift becomes a sacrifice, which will have value before God. Any sacrifice is useful if it is done out of love. This giving until it hurts---this sacrifice---is also what I call love in action.

Notes:

1. Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path*, Ballantine Books, 1995, p. 99
2. Many Christians say that there is a heavenly language and an earthly language. However, all the angels that appeared to man throughout the scriptures spoke in the language of the people they visited. We have no scriptural knowledge of the language angels might speak.
3. Cymbals played a part in the Jewish worship service, but they played an even greater role in the heathen worship of the goddess Cybele and the god Bacchus.
4. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226 AD) gave up his rich inheritance to the poor and became a Franciscan monk.
5. "In the Jewish community giving to the poor was held in high esteem by the rabbis and thought to have gained great merit. But there were requirements prohibiting one from giving all of his goods; for example, in a year he was not to give more than 20% of his entire possessions" F. Rienecker, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, p. 431 (1980).
6. W. Barclay, the *Letters to the Corinthians*, p. 132 (1956).

---

Catalog No. 4480  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
Fifth Message  
Ron Ritchie  
February 4, 1996

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1995 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.