

Chapter 13

The Priority of Love

Spiritual gifts are an important function for edifying one another in the church of Christ. However, spiritual gifts are to be exercised in love, not for enhancing one's prestige. These gifts are to be used in service to one another, not as a means of bolstering one's pride.

Love Is Essential

Verse 1—Most likely, Paul began with the subject of the gift of tongues because eloquence was greatly admired by the Corinthians. The following descriptions are used in a very broad way to illustrate his point.

Paul's argument is from the actual *if I speak with the tongues of men* (apparently Paul spoke in other languages) to the hypothetical *and of angels* (making it probable he did not speak in tongues of angels—whatever those are). Some have suggested they are a special way of communicating between angels as a type of heavenly language. However, in Scripture, angels always spoke in the language that was understood by the recipients.

It also could be that the statement *tongues of men and of angels* was meant to encompass every imaginable mode of speech—both earthly or heavenly, physical or spiritual.

The point was that if one speaking in tongues does *not have love* (ἀγάπην self-sacrificial giving that serves another's best good which cannot be reciprocated), then the use of tongues would only be hollow and empty, *I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal*. The clashing of a gong or repercussion of a cymbal would momentarily electrify, but then vanish away quickly.

He seems to say that without love, there is no spiritual significance to his gift of tongues. It is not this gift that is deficient, but Paul himself who, using the gift void of love, diminished his own personal value by using the gift otherwise.

Verse 2—Paul argued again from the actual *if I have the gift of prophecy* (he does have prophetic powers as an apostle) to the hypothetical *and know all mysteries and all knowledge* (otherwise, he would have to be omniscient!).

Continuing with the hypothetical, *and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains*, Paul echoes Jesus' teaching in Matthew 17:20. Yet, even with such a demonstrable faith *but do not have love, I am nothing* (οὐθέν none or nobody) and the use of the spiritual gift of faith comes up empty and meaningless.

If these gifts are used to benefit the giver rather than the receiver, then the purpose and function of the spiritual gifts has become entirely lost.

Actually, you are *nothing* in the sense that exalting yourself, by the use gifts designed to serve and benefit others, are nothing but a fraud or hoax. These gifts are intrinsically valueless if operating without love.

The Corinthians who are using gifts to promote themselves need to understand how useless was that endeavor.

Verse 3—Paul used two other hypothetical examples to argue how useless spiritual gifts are without love.

And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, so that even this most dramatic renunciation of self is meaningless.

And if I surrender my body to be burned, in the sense of possibly accepting one's martyrdom,

but do not have love, it profits me nothing. This ultimate act of self-sacrifice is valueless and is not commendable, most likely in the form of eternal rewards, if void of love.

The idea of profiting has to do with outcomes that are beneficial to the giver when exercising spiritual gifts in love. God wants the giver to profit from God's gift giving, as well as the receiver. Only when one's gift is discharged in love will there be any kind of profit.

The Character of Love

Testing the quality of our love is recognizing both the positive and negative aspects of our loving of others. The tests are behavioral not sentimental. Love is characterized by certain behavior. Those aspects are surveyed in the following verses.

What Loving Others Looks Like

Verse 4—One positive aspect includes *love is patient* (μακροθυμεῖ endures misfortune, to persevere patiently). This is the capacity to not retaliate when wronged.

The Corinthians should have expressed this trait rather than filing lawsuits against one another.

The idea is being slow to anger with people so that you do not immediately wipe them out, or turn them off while enduring. To give people a chance to work things out or let people have time to consider the situation.

Love is patient with an obnoxious teenager, inconsiderate employee, insensitive marriage partner, apathetic student, or vindictive associate.

Another positive aspect is that *love is kind* which is an active characteristic of love, while patience is passive. Patience is the capacity to absorb an annoying situation or misfortune while kindness takes action to reach out with goodness to an offender.

You might shovel your neighbor's driveway in the winter while shoveling yours, even though he is the same neighbor who has been inconsiderate toward your requests to turn down the noise at night.

What Not Loving Others Looks Like

Verse 4—*Love is not jealous* (ζηλοῖ to be heated, to boil with anger). This is being displeased at the success of others.

We can become spiteful and short with people because we see them enjoy something we want.

A person may have a relationship that we envy or opportunities that we do not have or qualities about themselves we do not possess and get angry about it.

Jealousy and envy murdered Abel (Genesis 4:3-8). Envy enslaved Joseph (Genesis 37:11, 28). Envy put Jesus on the cross: *For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy* (Matthew 27:18).

Love does not brag (περπερεύεται to boast or self display) is the desire to receive admiration, recognition and applause. It refers to the person who talks about himself.

For instance, we are impatient with another because we would rather have them listen to us than take the time to listen to them. We are anxious to make a point that will motivate them to admire us.

Love is not arrogant (φουσιῶται to puff up, inflate, to swell up) is a preoccupation with our own significance and importance that can lead to disdain of others. It ignores how the other feels and asserts oneself regardless of the outcome.

For instance, criminal behavior can be sourced in an arrogant spirit because the person is consumed with self-importance that disrespects other people and their property.

Verse 5—*Love does not act unbecomingly* (ἀσχημονεῖ to act unseemly) which is to behave indecently or in a shameful manner. To be rude is to treat others in such a way as to create embarrassment by displaying haughty, cutting or sarcastic behavior.

For instance, a father can shame his son by putting him down or punishing him in front of a group of his peers or friends. Love would be tactful and not want to raise a blush.

Love does not seek its own, insisting on having its own way, nor does it put its own interests before the needs of others.

The spirit of self-interest is stubborn, intractable, and inflexible, while insisting that everyone else has to adjust. You might be threatened that no one would work with you in the company if you did not express a certain political point of view.

Love is not provoked (παροξύνεται to irritate or arouse to anger) is a spirit that is resentful, irritable and brings a lot of misery to those who receive the brunt of its fury and insensitivity.

Scripture commands *Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them* and *Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart* (Colossians 3:19, 21). A husband or father who becomes irritated with his wife or provokes his children, is a perversion of their loving responsibility to them.

Love does not take into account a wrong suffered is when a person deliberately keeps a record of all the wrongs done against them. The registry of injuries builds up a spirit of resentment and malice toward another who one is unwilling to forgive.

Many marital breakdowns happen because one of the partners has developed contempt for the other due to a series of injuries they have kept record of and find it impossible to live with anymore.

Verse 6—*Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness* which is something morally wrong. It is a violation of God's righteous standards that are connected to His nature. Love stands on God's righteous standards and rejects gloating over any form of evil.

Love cannot share in the glee of successful transgressions. It would be unacceptable for love to support someone desiring to destroy another's reputation.

But love rejoices (συγχαίρει to take part in, to congratulate) *with the truth*, which is defined as ‘the way things actually are,’ a record of which is the Word of God.

Tolerance of opinions, practices and behavior, which ignore and replace God’s standard is unloving.

It is not loving to be tolerant of sexual relations outside of marriage, indebtedness, or speaking evil of others, because these are violations of God’s absolute standard of truth in his Word.

Application

There is no better way for God to serve our best interest than to increase our capacity to love.

Verse 7—Love has the capacity to manage *all things* without exception in at least four ways.

1. **Love Protects:** Love *bears all things* in the sense that rather than bringing something unworthy to light. Love covers it so that it is not magnified, as Peter said, *and above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins* (1 Peter 4:8). It covers it over so it can be dealt with appropriately.
2. **Love Pardons:** Love *believes all things* not in the sense of believing a lie, but never believing evil of another without the facts being investigated.
3. **Love Promotes:** Love *hopes all things*, which is being hopeful that those who have failed will not fail again rather than concluding that failure is inevitable. No cause, situation or person is regarded as completely hopeless. The idea is that even when love has no evidence, it hopes for and believes the best with regard to the person or situation.
4. **Love Perseveres:** Love *endures all things* by never quitting or giving up on anyone. It is the capacity to sustain the assaults of suffering and hurt and never cave into self-pity, resentment, impatience, irritability, rudeness, jealousy, self interest, bragging or arrogance.

The Permanence of Love

Verse 8—Compared to the over-emphasis upon the spiritual gifts in the Corinthian assembly, *love never fails*.

Spiritual gifts have a place and time, but when these gifts have fulfilled their purpose in God’s plan and the physical and temporal things upon which we set our affection disappear, love outlasts it all.

For instance, *but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away* (καταργηθήσονται to cause to become inactive or inoperative), which is in the passive voice meaning some act will cause prophecy to cease.

If there are tongues, they will cease (παύσονται to die out on their own), which is in the middle voice, meaning tongues will desist without any intervening agent.

If there is knowledge, it will be done away indicates that, like prophecy, some act will also terminate this gift.

Verse 9—The reason the gifts of knowledge and prophecy will be *done away* by some intervening agent, is because *we know in part* (as opposed to the whole) *and we prophecy in part* showing the imperfect nature of these gifts.

Both knowledge and prophecy are limited and not exhaustive in scope, however crucial they are to the life of the church.

The use of *in part* is emphatic, making a strong case for the gift's temporary nature.

What's interesting is there is no further discussion of tongues in the context. It may be due to the fact that they would peter out on their own, while the others would be terminated in time.

Verse 10—With the temporary usefulness of these gifts in an imperfect age, *when the perfect* (τέλειον brought to an end, mature, complete) *comes, the partial will be done away.*

The gifts of knowledge and prophecy which were *in part* and *partial* having been limited and not exhaustive in scope, will cease their function by being set aside.

They were limited by virtue of only being useful for the church age, and they were not exhaustive in the sense that they were not omniscient.

With the coming of *the perfect* (which is ambiguous enough for some to say its the completion of the New Testament canon; others the coming of the new heavens and earth; yet others the return of Christ either at the rapture or his Second Coming; or the maturing of the church through the course of the church age), both the gift of prophecy and the gift of knowledge will vanish.

If *the perfect* is the canon of Scripture, then these gifts ceased with the completion of the New Testament.

If *the perfect* is the return of Christ, which Paul seemed to believe could have even happened in his lifetime (1 Thessalonians 4:15) because all of the necessary conditions were in place (e.g. Israel was a nation, the Temple was still standing, Rome was in control, etc.), though he never predicted it, then these gifts would soon cease.

Once those signs were displaced (e.g. Israel was dispersed, the Temple was destroyed, etc.), after Paul's lifetime, the apostles would have realized that Jesus wouldn't come back for some time (it has been over 2000 years now).

Even though it did not happen, historically, it looks like a distinction can be made between gifts that are revelatory in nature having diminished, and those which are edifying in nature continuing on today.

Verse 11—It's characteristic for children to preoccupy themselves with things of temporary value. *When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child* similar to the Corinthians interest in utilizing spiritual gifts for personal gain rather than a preoccupation with love that supplied an edifying motivation for their use.

Like a grown up, *when I became a man, I did away with childish things*, so that with time maturity develops and one can be occupied with what is necessarily and eternally valuable.

That would include not fomenting a hierarchy of gifts or over-emphasizing spiritual gifts to the exclusion or expense of love.

Verse 12—Using this analogy, *for now we see in a mirror dimly* (αἰνίγματι something obscure, an enigma or riddle), Paul referred to the imperfect intervening time until *the perfect comes* along with the gifts available with which to serve one another.

But then face to face is most likely when we see Jesus Christ and receive our resurrected bodies, which Paul describes in chapter 15.

Now I know in part in this present imperfect age, *but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known*, which is the nature of the contrast between this imperfect time and the perfect time which awaits us.

When the Lord has resurrected us, we will know fully as God knows us. God knows everything about us; this is how we also are known.

But in heaven, we will know God as perfectly as we can; we will know just as we also are known. It doesn't mean we will be all knowing as God is, but it means we will know Him as perfectly as we can know.

Now he knows us directly but one day we will see Him with perfect clarity. When *the perfect comes*, it will supersede the partial.

Verse 13—Paul resumed his argument about the supremacy of love. *But now faith, hope, love, abide these three*, highlighting that the three great pursuits of the Christian life are not “miracles, power, and gifts”; they are *faith, hope, and love*.

The word *abide* indicates continuity, for it literally means “remain.” Though the gifts are precious, and given by the Holy Spirit today, they were never meant to be the focus or goal of our Christian lives.

Apparently, Paul introduced faith and hope at this point to show that love is not only superior to the gifts, but it is superior even to other great virtues. *But the greatest of these is love* because it will only increase when we see the Lord rather than decreasing in us, as faith and hope will.

Love outstrips the other major Christian virtues because it will outlast them.

Application

1. You never ever will go wrong when you Biblically love.
2. All of your ministry must be driven by love.
3. Spiritual gifts, unlike love, are not eternal in nature but will cease to be used.
3. All Biblical virtues are significant, but love is the foundational virtue now and forevermore.