

CGYG & LIFE Bible Study: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

For Discussion: How is love defined by the world or by those around you? What is the basis of this love? What is its goal or purpose?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

For review: In 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Paul taught on what it meant for believers to be one in the body of Christ. God arranged the members of the body and bound them together by the Holy Spirit so that each part has value and contributes in a way that is needed by the others. Any differences in the functioning of the parts were also set by Him, not to elevate the status of some to the exclusion of others, but as a reflection of the diversity that is inherent to the body. This also provides the context for the different members to grow in mutual concern for one another, sharing in each other's sufferings and rejoicing in their common life together. Paul ends the chapter with an exhortation to eagerly desire the greater gifts and mentions a way that is even more excellent than the spiritual gifts. He then proceeds to present a discourse on the supremacy of love in the life of the believer.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

What personal benefits might the Corinthian believers have expected to gain from practicing the gifts mentioned by Paul, even in the absence of love?¹ What does Paul say is the true result of using these gifts without love?²

¹The expectations might have been that the speaker of tongues would please and impress others through the use of their gift, that status/recognition would be gained by those who had prophetic powers, knowledge, and extraordinary faith, and that a great reward would be earned by those who were the most self-sacrificial and devoted.

²Paul took as his examples some of the gifts that were most valued by the Corinthians and asserted that each one, even in its greatest manifestation, was devoid of worth if it was not motivated by love (i.e., a gift of tongues that transcends human languages, an understanding of *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge, a mountain-moving faith).

²**Tongues** – The gift of tongues was being practiced in the public meetings (**1 Cor. 14:5**). Without love, even the exercise of a mystical, otherworldly language (or supernatural use of a human language) is no more beneficial to others than a disorderly gong or cymbal. Worse than having no benefit, it becomes a disruptive distraction – **Accomplished nothing**.

²**Prophecy, knowledge, faith** – Even for the second-highest gift (**1 Cor. 12:28**), without love the person who defines himself by it is nothing. Paul had already written earlier that bare knowledge leads to pride (**1 Cor. 8:1**), which is inwardly focused and destructive to the church (i.e., selfish, divisive). Again, this is worse than being of no influence. Even a true faith expressed to the fullest degree distorts and misrepresents who God is if it is done without love – **Am nothing**.

²**Giving, mercy, martyrdom** – The giving away of possessions was for the poor (NIV84), not asceticism. Without love, the most generous acts bring no benefit to the giver even if others gain by them. Even dedication and sacrifice to the highest degree, culminating in the surrender of one's life, can be done selfishly, rendering it of no account to us – **Gained nothing**.

What place does love hold in the practice of our spiritual gifts?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

What principles of godly love can be seen from the attributes that Paul gives in verses 4-7?¹ What makes this love greater than the love that the world shows (Matt. 5:43-48, Luke 6:32-36)?²

¹Love is more than a feeling. While it is associated with specific attitudes, it is also characterized by a decision to act and respond thoughtfully and deliberately according to specific values (**1 John 3:18**).

-Love's attributes include positive and negative elements as well as attitudes and actions (Love: is/is not, does/does not).

¹Many of love's attributes revolve around interacting with others (e.g., patience, kindness, not envying, not being rude).

-Love looks to 1) treat others in the best possible way (e.g., kind, not rude, not irritable) and 2) think of others in the best possible way (e.g., not envying, believing all things, hoping all things).

¹Many of love's attributes are invoked by difficult or trying circumstances (e.g., being patient, not envying, not being irritable or resentful, bearing (protecting – NIV84), believing (trusting – NIV84), hoping, enduring).

-The attributes do not describe a love that is easy or comfortable but one that is costly, effortful, and sometimes painful.

¹Love has a moral quality since it takes a stance on truth and wrongdoing (v.6). This sets boundaries for how we are to love and what that love can profess – love calls good and evil as they are instead of bending to the views of the world.

¹In its willingness and ability to handle "all things" (v.7), love shows itself to be without bounds (**Matt. 18:21-22**).

²Godly love is sacrificial and is based on His unchanging character rather than its recipient or their performance.

-Love that is cheap or easily reciprocated is no better than the world's love and is deserving of no special commendation (**Matt. 5:46-47**).

²Godly love is wholeheartedly and single-mindedly devoted to giving itself for the good of the beloved – it loves like it has nothing to lose, not like it has nothing to gain.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

What contrast does Paul draw between love and the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge?

- Prophecies and knowledge will pass away and tongues will cease (v.8) but love never ends (“love never fails” – NIV84).
- Just as childish ways are only appropriate for children and moving on from them is expected in adulthood, spiritual gifts are only intended and appropriate for a time – they need to be recognized as temporary to be valued correctly.
- We know in part (v.9, 12), we prophesy in part (v.9). Once the perfect comes, there will be no need for the partial (v.10).
- Two contrasts are given in verse 12 between how things are now (partial) and how they will be (full).
 - Seeing a distorted reflection vs. seeing face-to-face
 - Knowing in part vs. knowing fully

What makes love greater than faith and hope (1 John 4:8, 16; John 13:34-35; 1 John 4:18-21; Gal. 5:22-23, Col. 3:12-14; 1 Pet. 4:8; 1 Cor. 16:14; Rom. 13:8-10)?

- God is love (1 John 4:8, 16) – it is a defining character of who He is.
- Followers of Christ will be recognized by love (John 13:34-35) – it is also a defining character of God’s children.
- Love is the test of genuine faith (1 John 4:18-21).
- Love is chief among the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).
- Love binds together and unifies the other Christian virtues (Col. 3:12-14) – love is to be put on “above all” the other virtues.
- Love covers over a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8) – loving one another is to be done “above all.”
- We are to do everything in love (1 Cor. 16:14).
- Love fulfills the law (Rom. 13:8-10) – love for one another is to be considered an ongoing debt that we never finish paying.
- Love is a precursor, it is because God acted on His love for us that we can have faith and hope at all.
- The greatest graces of the Christian life (even more so than spiritual gifts) are faith, hope, and love. Faith and hope are states of “not yet” that will be realized in the future, while love has been given to us in its fullness in Christ.
- In the end, faith will be vindicated, hope will be realized, but love will endure unchanged eternally.

What event does Paul allude to in verses 10 and 12?¹ What encouragement can we receive from this truth?²

¹There is certainty that the perfect (Christ) will come – “when” perfection comes (v.10). This is similar to the reminder in the Lord’s Supper that Jesus will come again (1 Cor. 11:26).

²We have the hope of encountering the God of love face-to-face and knowing Him fully (v.12, 1 John 3:2).

-There will be full seeing and full knowing when God’s love has accomplished its work. We will then have perfect love for God and for one another.

²When He returns, those who have lived and served in His love will see how their efforts have contributed to the building up of the eternal body of Christ (accomplished something), that they not only belong to but are themselves like Christ (am something), and have a store of heavenly treasures awaiting them (gained something).

Rewrite each of the statements about love from verses 4-7 using your own name (e.g., ____ is patient, ____ is kind). What situations in your life challenge you the most in demonstrating these attributes?¹ How can you better exemplify godly love when you face these challenges?²

Reflection and application

While Paul’s teaching in this passage speaks primarily of a love for one another, we need to understand this against the backdrop of the one who must occupy the primary place of love in our lives. Our love is patterned after the love of God, who is Himself love, and the one who enables us to show His love to others. There is certainty in Christ’s return, and with Him a superseding of the gifts we hold dear in this life. However, with His coming we will see Him face-to-face and enjoy completeness of knowledge and fullness in our fellowship with Him. Even now, believers should be cultivating the love of God in their lives as it is a fundamental aspect of the image of God that all His children must bear (1 John 4:8). Therefore, let us seek to be built up in this love as we wait for Him, allowing the fruit of the Spirit to guide our practice of the gifts of the Spirit so that our service may be of genuine worth and endure the test of fire in the last Day (1 Cor. 3:12-15).