

A More Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 13

With Study Questions

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2/24/2008*

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Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ⁻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. ⁻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.

⁻⁴⁻ __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; ⁻⁷⁻ __bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁻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. ⁻⁹⁻ __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.

⁻¹¹⁻ 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.

⁻¹³⁻ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love (1 Corinthians 13:1-13).

Introduction

It's been said that presentation is everything. In a fancy restaurant they don't merely pour the chocolate sauce on the dessert, they zigzag it on. While it may not be true that presentation is everything (if the chef accidentally uses salt instead of sugar, the beauty of the presentation will be short-lived), it certainly is something. Dismissing the message because

of the messenger is something people tend to do with great ease. If your speech is gruff or coarse, people will generally have little interest in what you might have to say.

I remember gravitating to those who gave me winsome smiles and could convey the genuine impression that they truly cared for me. Over the years I have grown to have a bit of distrust and even disdain for those who have mastered the art of the compassionate veneer. Not that there is anything necessarily foul about a charitable facade, but it is so often displayed at the expense of true content. When it comes to matters of faith I've come to appreciate prophets over pals.

Nonetheless both content and presentation have their place in Christian fellowship. Paul exhorts us, not merely to speak, but to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15)¹.

Often quoted at weddings, this 'love' chapter actually has, as its context, the proper use of spiritual gifts. The apostle Paul began his discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter twelve of First Corinthians. He ended that chapter promising to show us a "more excellent way." It is a more excellent way for Christians to interact, edify, challenge and nurture one another. And because the body of Christ more properly functions when this excellence is pursued, God is more properly glorified.

This more excellent way is not actually a gift per se but a virtue which is to be present in the exercise of all gifts. The more excellent way is, of course, love. It is quite startling how high this virtue ranks.

If I Have Not Love

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 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. 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 (13:1-3).

¹ Though 'love' here may not mean a tone in one's voice or an expression on one's face (it likely addresses the motivation behind speaking the truth), tone and face, nonetheless tend to convey the speaker's motivation.

Messengers Don't Nullify Messages

Paul's main point here should be obvious to us all: love is to adorn every attribute. If love does not adorn my other gifts I am a clanging cymbal, I am nothing and it profits me nothing. Let me be quick to say, however, that the indictment is against the messenger, not the message. My lack of ability to be loving does not pardon the hearer any more than a parent's poor leadership gives license to a child's insubordination.

It is the tongue-speaker, the man of knowledge, the man of great faith, the good-deed-doer and the martyr who become nothing. Their loveless disposition in no way impugns the actual claim the prophetic message has on the hearer. In other words, if I speak the truth – but it is not spoken in love – it is still the truth and, therefore, still binding upon the hearer. My guilt in speaking in an unloving manner (like the father who exasperates his child) is that I am tempting my hearer to disregard the message.

The use of gifts (any gifts) for notoriety, prestige or to justify or elevate oneself is disgraceful. If we do not have love, the exercise of spiritual gifts is neither impressive to God nor profitable to us.

The Truth About Love

Christians are to exercise the gifts given to them by God in a loving manner. So what does it mean to love? Do I get to define it myself? Some pit love against truth. I've heard it said, "Give me love and the truth will come." After all love, as we shall see, is greater than faith and hope! Would you rather live in a church, home or nation full of love or truth? Most people would say "love" – a dangerous answer.

So far from being mutually exclusive, love and truth are interdependent. In other words, without truth, love becomes indiscernible and is generally reduced to passion. It is not uncommon for the concept of love to be thrown around by those who desire sexual promiscuity. Is that true love? Apart from knowing the truth about love how can we question the Hollywood sitcom or soap-opera definition of love?

Add to that the biblical proposition that true love flows from genuine, biblical truth. Since the presentation of the true gospel is the power of salvation (Romans 1:16) we can conclude that truth doesn't

merely define love, it is the means by which true love is produced.² An undefined false love produces mere chaos and licentiousness. The apostle Paul, realizing this puts forth his doctrine (truth) of love.

Paul doesn't merely tell us how important love is then leave us to define it ourselves. He teaches us about love. He corrects our false notions of love.

Love Is...

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; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Catechism

Before we seek to unfold the Apostle's wisdom regarding love, let's have a short time of catechism in order for us to avoid mixing up our categories. The Bible, basically, has two main messages. What are they? The Law and the Gospel. What is the Law? What God demands. What is the Gospel? What God provides. So is this love chapter law or gospel? Law. Why? Because it is God telling us what we should do rather than Him telling us what He has done for us.

Why is it important for us to make this distinction? Because we wouldn't want to think that God's love for us (the gospel) was contingent upon our ability to be good law-keepers. It is just the opposite. Our desire to be good law-keepers flows from appreciating what God has done for us. Mixing those two things up will cause great duress in the hearts and lives of God's children. We certainly don't treat our own children this way. We don't tell them if they're good enough we'll love them. We love them trusting that our love for them (which often includes discipline) will produce goodness in them. We can be more or less effective at this, but God is supremely effective.

Back to Paul's definitions.

² My point here is that where there is no gospel (truth) there is no Christ (at least in terms of people coming to faith in Christ) and where there is no Christ, there is no genuine love. In short, no truth = no love.

Love Is

It would be overly ambitious at this point to pursue an exhaustive study of love. The nuts and bolts of loving God and loving our neighbor are found in summary in the Ten Commandments³; what we have before us is a disposition. Love most assuredly consists of outward duties but it also has an inward temperament. Husbands, for example, shouldn't think they're loving their families by merely bringing home a paycheck; wives should not think they're being submissive to their husbands if they begrudgingly capitulate to their husband's headship; children shouldn't think they're honoring their parents by mere outward obedience. The outward act is certainly included and necessary for true love to be present, but Paul takes it deeper.

There will be a repetitive theme of love's *patience* – it “**suffers long**”. It's defined by Vines as “a quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish; it is the opposite of anger, and is associated with mercy.”⁴ James puts it nicely:

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; -20- for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:19, 20).

I personally have a forty-eight hour rule. If I find myself offended I (if possible) give it two days (a time when I pray, calm down and seek counsel) before responding. Some may need only a few minutes, others weeks.

Love is not passionately reactionary, but rather it is “**kind**.” That is to say that genuine love should have mildness to it. This, of course, naturally flows from patience or long-suffering.

Love does not “**envy**”. Joseph's brothers envied his father's love for him leading them into great evil (Acts 7:9). A lack of godly contentment inhibits true love. When our friends have good fortune, we should rejoice with them and resist becoming bitter because we feel short-changed.

³ This is not to say that the Ten Commandments do not include the inward temperament. But the inward temperament seems to be Paul's main emphasis.

⁴Vine, W. 1981; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *Vine's Expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words*. Revell: Old Tappan NJ

Love does not “**parade itself**” or put itself forward or vaunt its works. In other words a person who is acting in true love doesn’t put a shingle on his forehead announcing his great love. It’s not a show. This becomes especially difficult when you’ve been making the silent effort of loving and are accused of neglect. Don’t be tempted to hang the shingle. If you don’t resist this temptation you will violate the next law of love which is to avoid being “**puffed up**” or arrogant. In modern terms, avoid being full of yourself.

Love does “**not behave rudely,**” shamefully or unbecomingly. A loving person is circumspect. He is aware of his surroundings and considers those surroundings in his speech and manners. There was a woman who used to openly criticize her spouse in public venues. Her criticisms may or may not have been valid, but her lack of propriety was rude and not an act of love toward her husband.

Love does “**not seek its own.**” In other words, genuine love is not searching for reciprocation. The reason we fail in every aspect of love leading up to this (patience, envy, parading oneself, being puffed up, and rudeness) is because we have a secret agenda of reception. And when due time has gone by and our ship has not come in, our paltry love is revealed for what it is.

It is this type of false love that is “**easily provoked**”. If I am not concerned with what I get in return I am not tempted to rage when it doesn’t come. It is also this type of false love that “**thinks evil**”. The New American Standard translates this, “**does not take into account a wrong suffered,**” and is cleverly rendered by one theologian as “it meditateth no mischief.” In other words, true love does not keep a ledger for retaliation. As one man said, “When my wife gets mad she doesn’t get hysterical, she gets historical.”

True love does “**not rejoice in iniquity.**” I should not be happy when I find my suspicions about my acquaintances were true and indeed they were evil! We are to lament at evil and rejoice when truth prevails.

What does it mean that love “**bears, believes, hopes and endures all things?**” Does this mean love is not wise? That it does not discriminate? Certainly not! That “**love bears all things**” mirrors that long-suffering of which we already spoke; that “**love believes all things**” does not mean love believes contradictions, but that love is not overly suspicious. Calvin wrote,

...that a Christian man will reckon it better to be imposed upon by his own kindness and easy temper, than to wrong his brother by an unfriendly suspicion.⁵

To **“hope all things”** is the kind of love that recognizes God’s power to change lives and grant repentance. Matthew Henry explains,

And when, in spite of inclination, it cannot believe well of others, it will yet hope well, and continue to hope as long as there is any ground for it.⁶

And yet a third time Paul puts forth the notion of patience – that it doesn’t give up. True **“love endures all things.”** It is this emphasis which leads into Paul’s next point.

Love Never Fails

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. ⁹ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹³ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love (1 Corinthians 13:8-13).

When the Perfect Comes

There is some debate as to what Paul means by **“when that which is perfect has come.”** It very likely refers to eternal glory in heaven. Paul’s

⁵Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin's Commentaries: 1 Corinthians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (1 Co 13:7). Ages Software: Albany, OR

⁶Henry, M. 1996, c1991. *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (1 Co 13:4). Hendrickson: Peabody

point is the transitory⁷ and inferior nature of gifts compared to faith, hope and love.

Grow Up

There appears to be an accusatory tone in Paul's writing. Perhaps the members of the church at Corinth were being childish in the utilization of their spiritual gifts. It is truly awkward and sometimes disheartening when we buy a nice gift for our children only to find them arguing about who gets to play in the box. Paul's point seems to be that they are viewing the gifts as an end in themselves and that these wonderful gifts they prize so highly will one day evaporate. It is a childish endeavor to exercise the gifts of God in such a way as to forget the love of God.

Faith, Hope and Love

Paul then mentions "**faith, hope and love.**" What is faith? An examination of biblical, saving faith will reveal three things: *knowledge* – you know what it is you're putting your faith in – the facts; *assent* – you agree that it is true; *trust* – you appropriate it – you make it yours.

Hope is the sure expectation of a yet future or invisible promise. It is because of hope that we persevere in faith. These both, of course, will no longer be necessary in glory.

Love, however, is eternal – faith and hope will no longer be necessary in heaven, but love will always be. A loving use of gifts facilitates faith, hope and love as well. Let us prayerfully consider whether or not this is the actual case in our lives.

Gospel Love

There are some, and I would be among them, who believe that every sermon should contain those two major categories we spoke of earlier – law and gospel. For the law without the gospel is a minister of death (2 Corinthians 3:7). But the necessity of the gospel is not readily apparent without the law for the law reveals to us the knowledge of our

⁷ This also refutes that notion that the immutability of God requires the immutability of gifts.

own sin (Romans 3:20). Oft times the gospel is only presented to Christians as something they are to share with non-believers. But, similar to all love relationships, Christians are to continually hear the gospel and seek to plumb the depths of God's love for them.

And since I have not yet spoken any gospel, let us briefly speak of it now. It will most assuredly oil the gears of our love even further to ponder the words of Jesus,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34).

So how does Jesus love us? I was doing a radio broadcast on the grace of the gospel. I was laboring the issue that man is dead in his sins, and can offer nothing to God. Man, apart from God's grace cannot even generate his own faith. The Bible teaches that we were His enemies (Romans 8:7). God's love overcomes our rebellion. I was discussing how the Bible teaches that God's love for us is without condition – He doesn't love or choose us because of some quality or attribute He saw in us (2 Timothy 1:9). He loves us – not because of but in spite of.

I sought to emphasize that the loving work of Christ on the cross was a powerful and sacrificial act of love – effective to save those who are the objects of God's love. That the love of God doesn't wait for us to overcome our rebellion but by His Spirit, His love effectively overcomes our rebellion. And that God's love is so enduring that His true children would persevere in this grace unto glory. It is pretty heavy theology.

Finally a caller got through who desired to gently chastise me. "When are we going to quit discussing doctrine and talk about love?" I could almost hear the grumblings of the entire radio audience give their hearty, amen! But is it not obvious that we cannot begin to know how to love others until we begin to understand how Christ loves us. We need to know what we are imitating.

A love which has the imitation of Christ at its heart will be an enduring love – a true love – a more excellent way.

Questions for Study

1. How are Christians to speak the truth? Why is this important (page 2)?
2. What is the context of the “love” chapter (page 3)?
3. If you exercise great gifts without love, what are you (page 3)?
4. Does a loveless messenger actually nullify the message (pages 3, 4)?
5. Are the tongues of angels in verse one a good argument for an indistinguishable language (page 4)?
6. What’s more important, truth or love? Explain (pages 4, 5).
7. Discuss the aspects of godly love (pages 5-7).
8. Why does Paul bring up the idea of being like a child (page 8)?
9. Define faith and hope (pages 8, 9).
10. What is one important reason for understanding the doctrines of grace (Calvinism)?