

Today's Sermon

The Supreme Excellence of Christ's Way of Love

1 Cor 12:31-13:3

Pastor/Elder Phil Layton, GCBC Date, 2021

****PRAY****

Please turn in God's Word to 1 Corinthians 13 and I'm excited to dive into this chapter with you. There's a lot under the surface for us to explore and see in the weeks ahead. There's no deeper subject than the love of God that Paul prayed we would see the depth and breadth and height and width of it. We've been singing it, I've been swimming in it, let's go deeper together. May God teach us the deep things of His Spirit and the deep love of Jesus. Because of how deep the Father's love for us is, we're to love others deeply.

Really 1 Cor. 13 starts at the end of chapter 12.

12:31 But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

FAMOUS WORDS – weddings – prominent even in secular ceremonies

- British PM Tony Blair at funeral service for Princess Diana
- President Obama quoted from 1 Cor 13 in his inaugural address
- FDR in 1933 took oath of office with his hand resting on v. 13

CONTEXT – not secular ceremonies, written for spiritual family in church.

Paul isn't writing for a happy bride and groom celebrating their mutual love – he's writing for an unhappy and unloving bride of Christ - the troubled Corinthian church. Not a wedding gift – a warning about gifts in the church.

Not just some nice words about love, he's correcting those who aren't nice in how they speak and act with others in the congregation. Not a marriage present for a couple pledging vows of selfless love,

Paul presents a “church full of self-centered Christians that there is a better way to live—not just on your wedding day but every day for the rest of your life” (Philip Ryken)¹

Well-known and well-loved verses, but it’s been said² “the love affair with this love chapter has also allowed it to be read regularly apart from the context, which does not make it less true but causes one to miss too much.”

CONTEXT OF CORINTH: known for self-seeking, sexual sin, competition

v. 1-3 (our focus today) are about the **gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit (love)**. The highest gifts “of men and of angels” without love are noisy, annoying and are nothing. This is a letter to church in Corinth with:

- Conflict instead of kindness (ch 1, so 13:4 reminds *love is kind*)
- There was envy, boasting (ch 3, but love *does not envy or boast*)
- Uncharitable judging (ch 4, but love believes and hopes the best)
- In ch 5 self-seeking sexual sin wasn’t confronted, apparently in name of ‘love’ (but love isn’t self-seeking, only rejoices in truth)
- Ch 6 they’re resentfully bringing records of wrongs as lawsuits in court, more than being rude, they sued other church members
- In ch 8 Paul says they were arrogant (but love *is not arrogant*)
- So ch 13 wasn’t for flowery effect, it was to fix errors with love
- Not a beautiful poem for a home, for ugly problems in a church
- But this is exalted language to show a more excellent way, 12:31

And ultimately it’s to exalt the Lord of love. Look at 14:1: “*Pursue Love...*” That’s the purpose in the context of this letter, the purpose for the church:

- Chapter 10 “*whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God*” (v. 31)
- Chapter 15 says “*by the grace of God, I am what I am*” (v. 10)
- Chapter 16 “*Let all that you do be done in love*” (v. 14). Ch 13 how

GCBC Purpose Statement: This church exists by the grace of God and for the glory of God as the ultimate purpose in all that we do. [SDG banner]

We seek to glorify God by ... pursuing God in worship, prayer, preaching to the church, proclaiming the gospel to the lost, personal love for God and obedience to His commands (including edifying relationships in the body, fellowship, discipleship, etc.). Stir one another to love, speak truth in love.

15 years ago this month my family first came out to this church to visit.
TALK ABOUT FIRST INTERACTIONS WITH THE LEADERS HERE.
TALK ABOUT LOVING HOSTS WHO CARED FOR ME, MY FAMILY.
LOVE OF PASTOR DALE AND OTHERS (you as he shared last week).

But Rev 2 warns us not to lose our first love or neglect what we did at first.

If you've lost your first love, repent, come to the Lord of love in 1 Cor 13. I'm concerned of unloving interactions between families and in this church family even this month, and as shepherds we're burdened to help in love. This weekend I had to ask forgiveness of a brother, and help a hurt sister. The church or individuals in it can lose love and it needs to be rekindled. And we also lose loved ones, and need to love well those who suffer loss.

We walked that journey of death at our home last year, many have
Spring of 2021: Marge Bell, Marion Cundall (to Dale and daughter Joyce), Loralee Baxter lost her husband David, Bob White (to Carol, Woodwards), Delton (Louise's husband, Mark's dad, grandpa to Freemans and Dixons).

July, August, September: Alicia Webster (loved our kids like a grandma, always bought them all Christmas presents), Robin Haller's mom, Kathie Griffin's husband Kevin (dad to Brittany Kulikovsky), Suzanne Barb's dad, Ron Foltz's wife Marcia (mom to Amanda here and her siblings), Frances Owen's husband Kemp, Elizabeth Tharp's brother (and Tharp family was already grieving loss of Guy Tharp's son in November), Steve Visentin lost his mom, and Charlene Stewart lost her sister. That's 14 lost loved ones in a few months and 9 in the last 3. Far beyond funerals we need to keep loving those who have lost loved ones. This is a time to grow in how we show love practically (reach out to one of those names, ask how they're doing, get together for a meal, let them know you care, say the name of the loved one).

Take one or more of those names as a takeaway to pursue love
NEW BELIEVERS – w/in last 2-3 years saved, most newly saved I've seen
NEWLY MARRIED – w/in last 2-3 years, some of most we've ever had
 Great opportunity to lovingly bring them into your life to help grow
NEW PEOPLE – maybe 80 last 3 years, counting kids (in need of the 3 C's)

This is a timely study for our church family and families at home. This is a loving church, but Paul says excel still more in love.³ We need to grow and consider how to stimulate love. Your leaders need your prayer and help as we all pursue care, connection, community. I've been convicted by this study; I need to love better – being patient and kind in my words. I can be resenting or keeping record of wrongs lovelessly, or arrogantly self-seeking.

I too often want my own way, but God shows us the more excellent way of love. I haven't mastered this, I look to the Master Jesus who helps us love.

If love bears all, believes all, hopes all, and endures all, then our love fails. Lack of love has hurt loved ones even recently, but love can repair, rebuild.

I know there's relationships in this room that need love to repair, rebuild.

It takes recognizing as sin your proud, rude, irritable ways, and repenting. Ask forgiveness from God and those your sin affects. It takes God's love. Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, His steadfast love endures forever!

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- Goal of series:** 1) that we would know more of Christ's love in 1 Cor 13:4-7
- Love's leading qualities (ex: *love is patient and kind*)
 - And restraints (ex: *...love does not envy or boast*)
- 2) that each believer would grow more in practicing this love
- 3) that we would grow in helping each other apply this love
- Discussing applications, praying for, encouraging
 - Small groups, men's group, leadership groups, elders
 - Feedback forms, family devo/discussions, fellowship
- 4) that I will grow as a preacher.

Today for this introduction to the series we'll walk through the first 3 verses of chapter 13 and talk through the context and big idea, then next week and the following 10 weeks we'll go through v. 4-7, just part of a verse in depth: "Love is patient" will be its own sermon, "Love is kind" next sermon, etc.

Some of them go together ("boast ... arrogant" "irritable ... resentful"). The goal isn't just to know more, but to grow more in this love and helping each other to – and asking help where we need it – by His grace and for His glory

- Outline:**
1. God's Way of Love is Supremely Important
 2. The Church Must Pursue Love in Christ

#1. God's Way of Love is Supremely Important

This is God's way, not man's way (future weeks more on contrast). This is the sine qua non of Christianity (without nothing), indispensable, essential.

Book ends at the beginning and end of this chapter (READ 12:31 & 13:13): love is the supreme or *more excellent way ... the greatest of these is love*.

READ V. 1 WHILE BANGING AND MAKING A NOISE, WITHOUT TALK ABOUT TONGUES – GONG SHOW OR EMPTY SPEAKERS

"empty sound from a hollow vessel" or no better than pagan gongs
TALK WHAT ANNOYS – APPLY TO OUR GIFTS WITHOUT GRACE

Think of who you think has an angelic voice: if I could sing like her ...

Or men who use their tongues to preach with great gifts that I might covet: if speak with the accent of Alistair Begg (rolling righteous R's), the joyful exuberance and emotion of John Piper, the raspy gravity of R.C. Sproul, the passion of Steve Lawson, you add yours ... but without love, I am nothing.

² *And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.* Having the gift of prophecy and knowing all mysteries sounded great to this church (read ch 12 and 14). "I'm really something if I have those gifts." God's Word says "no, you're nothing without love." In our context, there's conflicting knowledge about "the science" and societal change (freedoms, fears, forcing compliance instead of personal choice).

"If I had all knowledge, I could fix this." Even if you did (which you don't), if you don't communicate in love, you're nothing. You may be right but go about it wrong minus "love is kind." Many SM posts could #I am nothing#

What about all faith in v. 2 that can move mountains? Wouldn't it be good for something? Paul says "without love no, and not just it's nothing, I am nothing." James says even the demons have faith, but it does nothing for them as there's no love. Faith without works is dead and faith without love is useless. Prophetic eloquence can be emptiness. All knowledge is nothing without loving. People won't care how much you know unless they know how much you care. You can be a prophet and "profit nothing" (v. 3 NAS).

On a divine calculator, multiplied gifts add up to nothing if you minus love.
 $5 - 1 = 0$ (all tongues, prophecy, all understanding, all knowledge, all faith)

BRIDGES ILLUSTRATION OF WRITING ZEROES ON THE PAGE¹

v. 3 says if I could give it all, give my life, without love, I gain nothing. It's clear he's not talking about natural love that all people have, some 'have not love.' In the context a few chapters later Paul says those with no love for the Lord are accursed but he says there's love for all in Christ (end of ch 16)

1 Cor 13 is about those who are in Christ who love others motivated by love for Christ. There was a guy years ago in India who set himself on fire like v. 3 says, and maybe he loved his cause, but it gained him nothing because he didn't do it out of love for Christ. This month is the 20th anniversary of men who gave their bodies to be burned in hijacked planes in love for their cause (and thinking they'd make love to virgins in paradise). But they didn't have love for Christ, so they're actually accursed in hell now. Remember Paul is writing as a former religious zealot, who saw it all as nothing w/out Christ.

GIVE GOSPEL HERE

At the end of Mt 7, Jesus talked about those who say "*Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name...and do many mighty works in your name*" (sounds like 13:2) but no real love relationship. God's love is supremely important.

Earlier this month we looked at Mk 12 where Jesus said '*the most important is ... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*' *The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* *There is no other commandment **greater than these***'... [the scribe saw love is much more than all sacrifices]

¹ take those zeros and put a one "in front of them and immediately they have value. This is the way it is with our gifts and faith and zeal. They are the zeros on the page. Without love [the one in the front], they count for nothing. But put love in front of them and immediately they have value. And just as the number two gives more value to a row of zeros than the number one does, so more and more love can add exponentially greater value to our gifts." Jerry Bridges, *Growing Your Faith* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004), 164-65.

In Mt 22:38 Jesus said loving God with all that's within you is the "**greatest commandment**. And the second is **like it**: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (NIV).

Jesus that same week rebuked the religious people who tithe (give 10%) but neglect 'the more important matters of the law' like mercy (Mt 23:23 NIV).

Lk 11:42 says "woe to you Pharisees! ... You neglect ... the love of God."

We should give to God of all that we are and all we have, as it's all His, but if we gave all our possessions and our body, but have not love, it's nothing. You could give more than 10% of your income to a church, even give 100% of profits to the poor, but without true love, you profit nothing spiritually.

Paul says offerings you give must be in love, for God loves a cheerful giver.

The point of 1 Cor 13:1-3 is all gifts or giving without love is noise, nothing

God's way of love is supremely important, it's central or essential, that's #1

#2. The Church Needs to Pursue Christ's Love (14:1 "Pursue love...")

This is where Paul's going at the end of the chapter but the way this chapter starts also reminds us of our need for Christ's love. If you turn to Jn 13 I really think we need Jn 13 first to know how to pursue the love of 1 Cor 13.

It's the upper room, Jesus washed their feet, He's about to go to the cross to wash away their sin, His disciples are about to fail even as they profess love

13:34 **A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.** ³⁵ *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* So this love is a mark of His true followers, and it's based on how Jesus loved us.

Now turn to Jn 15. Remember Paul said without love, the best things we do are nothing, and we're nothing or gain nothing (i.e., lasting spiritual value). Jesus uses the word *nothing* in Jn 15:5: *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for **apart from me you can do nothing**... ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love... [then in v. 12 the command love one another]*

This is crucial as we pursue love in the weeks ahead: what we do apart from love equals nothing, but apart from Christ we can do nothing (i.e., of lasting spiritual value). We can do nothing truly loving in the NT sense without abiding in Christ's love. We can't do this in the flesh, we need God's Spirit (the fruit of the Spirit is _____). But Jesus shows us in the flesh what the more excellent way looks like. Look to the supreme excellence of His love.

Application: read John 13-17 this week, look for helps to love like 1 Cor 13.

Ryken: **"We are nothing without love**—this is the message of 1 Corinthians 13:1–3. But Jesus does nothing without love ... Jesus is everything that I am not ... We are nothing without love [v. 1-3]. But when we know Jesus, who does nothing without love, he will help us love the way that he loves."⁴

Best way to illustrate our need - fill in the blank: _____ is patient and kind; _____ does not envy or boast; _____ is not arrogant or rude. _____ does not insist on its own way; _____ is not irritable or resentful; _____ does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. _____ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. _____ never fails...

Now fill in the blank with Jesus' name. That's our path for the weeks ahead

I wanted to end with some application thoughts you sent on feedback forms "Without God, we cannot love. Personally, I get frustrated when I can't love well or when the emotion eludes me. I get discouraged. But without God's grace of... godly love, we can't do anything. I'd like to see verses where it points to all of this and anything we have being from His power. There is no remnant of love that we have apart from Him. No self-sufficiency."

A sister in Christ wrote: I think it's very possible for some Christians to be ignorant of His presence and ongoing ministry in our lives and thus, albeit with the best of intentions, spend their efforts trying harder and "acting right" without really achieving it! "Apart from Him we can do nothing" -- not even love God, much less love our neighbor...Anytime we try to operate apart from the awareness of and dependence upon [the Spirit's] presence in our lives, we will fail... the Trinity is in us, loving and speaking and directing us into His ways through His Spirit. It is the Spirit who enables us to understand and apply the Word of God in truth. He "guides us into all truth," and the more we understand the Scriptures, the better we will come to know God. It is the love of God, ministered by the Spirit, that enables us to truly love our neighbor, but we can't love God fully unless we learn to know Him better and better, which He also does by His Spirit."

Another: 1 Cor 13 isn't 'a checklist but more as **the character of Christ**. The checklist appeals to my legalistic nature and leaves Jesus' person out of it.'

Another of you wrote: 'I tend to humanize this passage and apply it in my life, it would very good to **discover the love of Christ** through this passage'

Another: I need 'challenge to **change my behavior or my relationship with God** in my daily life. I'm talking about things like forgiving others and loving others and being challenged to really love the way Jesus loves.'

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Another: 'Will we love others regardless of whether we have anything in common with them? Will we reach out to greet others regardless of how well you know them. Will we break out of our own comfort zones and people we are comfortable with in order to show love to those around us that we don't know well in our church or other places. I struggle with these'

Sermon Discussion and Application Guide in your bulletin:

4. Is there a phrase in v. 4-7 that stands out or convicts you? What would applying love in your family or church look like for that ...?

5. As we gather, we're called to "consider how we may stir one another to love" (Hebrews 10:24)? Who, how and when will you do this?

7. For personal reflection and prayer for God's help: who can you "pursue love" (14:1) with this week? How and when will you pursue them in loving conversation?

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Loving the Way Jesus Loves* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 19.

² Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 625-26.

³ 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 NASB: Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for *anyone* to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰ for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more

⁴ Ryken, 28.