

# 1 Corinthians 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Corinthians chapter 13 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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.

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

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. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

[1:19] Now I know in part. Then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide. These three. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians chapter 13 is one of the most familiar texts in all of Paul, and yet for this very reason one of the most misunderstood. It is a text that is often read as an encomium to romantic love at weddings.

But, as usual, it belongs firmly in its context. It is in the middle of an argument. This chapter is part of the argument about spiritual gifts, and its purpose is to put the practice of the spiritual gifts in the appropriate place.

Love isn't so much an alternative to the spiritual gifts, as the way in which all such gifts must be exercised. Paul has previously spoken about the importance and primacy of the way of love.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 1. Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

[2:25] So Paul talking about the importance of love at this point is not a new theme in his letter. This chapter identifies the precise antidote to the Corinthians' inappropriate spirituality.

It is an integral part of Paul's larger argument, but is also a praise of love, an expression of its superlative character. Love is that which must govern everything, all expressions of the Christian life and practice.

By describing and praising love, Paul exposes the problems of the Corinthians, and he offers an alternative model for them to pursue. It begins with the absolute necessity of love in the first three verses, then it describes the glories of love in verses 4-7, its characteristics and its traits, and in verses 8-13 it contrasts the spiritual gifts and their provisional character to the enduring nature of love.

This love, of course, then, is not romantic sentimentality or love as such, but it is a love that follows the pattern of Christ's own love. Love, Paul argues, is indispensable.

Even the most elevated and remarkable spiritual gifts and practices, practiced apart from love, are worse than empty. Without love, being able to speak by the Spirit, not just in human tongues but also supposedly in angelic tongues, will be of no greater value than the sort of instruments that one finds in pagan worship, noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

[3:53] The Corinthians prided themselves on their spiritual knowledge, yet that too is worthless apart from love. Love, as Paul has argued in chapter 8, is how we know things truly.

Supposing we had faith sufficient to remove mountains, here Paul alludes to Matthew chapter 17 verse 20, For truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this

mountain, move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you. Even if they have that sort of faith, in the absence of love, they are nothing. Let us suppose that they sell all their worldly goods and give them to the poor. That too gains them nothing without love. At this point in the text, there is debate over whether we should read, deliver up my body to be burned, or deliver up my body in order that I may boast. It may be a reference to martyrdom, perhaps giving oneself into slavery for Christ.

Yet even the most extreme self-sacrifice is worthless apart from love. Paul now moves to describe love's defining traits, clearly contrasting with the behaviour of the Corinthians to this point.

[ 5 : 01 ] Love is patient. Patience is absolutely essential when dealing with others. Without patience, little can be accomplished. Patience is taking time with people. Patience is giving time to people.

Patience is making time for people. Patience is choosing your time with people. This is the behaviour of love. Love is kind. It's generous, benevolent, noble.

It's an active alternative to anger and resentment. It breaks their cycles. It interrupts them and starts something new. Love does not envy. It's not caught up in the status-seeking and the quest to pursue advantage over others that was so characteristic of the Corinthians.

It does not boast. You could think of the Corinthians' slogans and their claims for themselves, that they rule like kings. Theirs was a form of spirituality that boasted in status and over others.

Love is not arrogant. It does not seek or inflate its own importance as the Corinthians did. Their brand of knowledge puffed up in pride. But love is of a very different character.

[ 6 : 05 ] Love is not rude. It's mindful of the manner in which it treats others. It's concerned for appropriate social order and propriety. We might think of the rudeness of the Corinthians and their behaviour at the table of the Lord.

Their dishonouring, neglect and despising of each other. We might also think about Paul's teaching about head coverings. People who want to express their own authority and their own freedom could act in a way that dishonoured their head, that dishonoured themselves and also dishonoured others.

Love is courteous. It honours decorum and politeness. We'll see this even more in the chapter that follows. Love does not insist on its own way. Love does not revolve around its own interests.

It's prepared to surrender its rights for others. Love becomes all things to all men. Love is prepared to make sacrifices for the weaker brother. Love is prepared to abstain from exercising rights that might wound others.

Love is not irritable or resentful. It's not easily provoked to anger or bitterness. Its lack of preoccupation with its own rights allows it to suffer wrong without reacting out of grievance.

[ 7 : 11 ] Wounded pride, vengefulness or entitlement. Such love would not be given to the litigious behaviour that the Corinthians were given to in chapter 6. Love doesn't keep score.

How often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Love isn't preoccupied with such questions. Love does not tally up those petty grudges in its mental register.

The ways that in our status seeking we try and put ourselves ahead of others or reckon their debt to us. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. It grieves at the sin of the man in a relationship with his father's wife.

We can so often delight in other people's failings and sins. We see our enemy fall into sin and we rejoice. It enables us to feel superior and self-righteous. We gossip about other people's sins, sharing them as if they were a matter of entertainment.

Love, however, wishes what is good. In our own lives? In the lives of our enemies? Love rejoices in the truth. It's not about self-interest. It's about something that stands over against us.

[ 8 : 14 ] The truth itself. Love desires and rejoices in integrity. Truth never tidily aligns with our personal interests. But love wants to know the truth. It isn't defensive before the truth.

It lets its own interests be compromised for the sake of something greater. The truth itself. Love bears all things. Love is that which never ceases to support.

It keeps holding up relationships with others, even under the greatest burden and pressure. Love believes all things. It believes through all things. It never surrenders faith.

Not in human goodness, but in God. It perseveres with people, even when it might seem that they are beyond recovery. Love hopes all things. It never despairs of people or situations.

Love endures all things. It never gives up on or abandons people. Love is permanent in a way that the spiritual gifts are not. They are transitory. The fact that Paul is speaking into the Corinthian context is very clear here.

[ 9 : 13 ] Prophecies, tongues and knowledge are temporary and partial. When the fullness of revelation comes, spiritual gifts will pass away. These sign gifts are primarily for the purpose of attesting the truth of the gospel as it's first preached.

As time goes on, they become less prominent. The Corinthians, who think that they already reign, and have little sense of the not yet of the gospel, struggle to perceive the temporary character of the spiritual gifts.

The time will come when those gifts will fade or pass away. When they pass away, they will be replaced by something greater. Paul seems to allude to Numbers chapter 12 verses 6 to 8, the contrast between the faint and limited revelation that Aaron and Miriam and others had, and that enjoyed by Moses.

And he said, Hear my words. If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house.

With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles. And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Love is unique in the fact that it endures into the age to come.

[ 10 : 29 ] Faith, hope, and love are the Christian virtues. They're listed on several occasions in Paul. And he explores their interrelationship in a number of different ways. For instance, in Romans chapter 5 verses 1 to 5.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace by which we stand. And we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Galatians chapter 5 verses 5 to 6.

For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

[ 11 : 30 ] The spiritual gifts may be the scaffolding, but love is the mortar of the building of the church. The gifts and the manifestations will one day be removed, but what will be left is the love by which the building is established.

A question to consider. Chapter 12 ends with the words, and I will show you a still more excellent way.

This looks forward to the argument of chapter 13. How can the argument of chapter 13 be tied closely into the argument of chapter 12? In what respect does it represent a more excellent way than something in chapter 12?