

LOVE IS THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY

1. **Love Is Essential** (1 Corinthians 13:1-3; Matthew 22:36-40)
2. **The Rule and Power of Love** (Romans 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7)
3. **Love Endures Forever** (1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

Central Truth: Love is the greatest Christian virtue.

Focus: Recognize that Christlike love results from life in the Spirit and make it the rule of our living.

Evangelism Emphasis: Salvation brings the love of God into the sinner's life.

Golden Text: "Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

This week's lesson focuses on the topic of Christian love, and it examines primarily 1 Corinthians 13, which is known as the "love chapter." Paul's teaching on the nature and importance of love was needed urgently in the church at Corinth, which was a spiritual church but also an immature and confused church. Its immaturity was due, in part, to its being a young church plant, having been founded by the Apostle Paul only four years earlier (about twenty years after Pentecost). Except for Paul and his fellow ministers, everyone in the church was essentially a baby in the faith, desperately in need of growth, discipleship, and experience.

Because of our upbringing in a world with two thousand years of Christian history, it is difficult for us to comprehend what it must have been like for the Corinthian believers. The story of Jesus was new, fresh, and different from anything they had ever known. Jesus' teachings were alien to the city of Corinth, which was a thriving metropolis permeated with pagan religions and overflowing with immorality. Corinth was home to the temple of Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love, where one thousand young women provided sexual favors for the worshipers. There were also temples to other gods, such as Asclepius (Greek god of healing) and Isis (an Egyptian goddess). Thus, Paul's new

converts there had no Christian background that would have prepared them for lives of righteousness, purity, and love. First Corinthians reveals the church suffered from disunity, immorality, selfishness, and pride because many in the congregation had not separated themselves from the sinful customs of Corinthian culture.

Paul's letter to Corinth was an authoritative, but pastoral, attempt to guide the young church and to correct many problems that had developed in his two-year absence. He explained the health and well-being of the church would be determined by their growth in the fruit of the Spirit, especially love.

1. LOVE IS ESSENTIAL

A. Worthless Good Deeds (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling 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, and have not charity, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

The Holy Spirit was wonderfully active and present in the Corinthian church, and the gifts of the Spirit were in full operation. In fact, the gifts were so prominent that Paul said to the church, "You do not lack any spiritual gift" (1 Cor. 1:7 NIV). The frequent manifestation of spiritual gifts should have made the believers grateful, humble, and appreciative of God's grace; but, instead, the exercise of gifts had produced competition, jealousy, disunity, and boasting in the body of Christ. Paul asked the church, "What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift?" (4:7 NLT). The gifts were prominent, but they had become

a reason for pride, a motive for jealous envy, and a source of disorder and confusion in the worship services.

Paul's response to the church's misuse and abuse of the gifts was not to prohibit the manifestation of the gifts, but to regulate their use. Paul's guidance regarding the exercise of the gifts is found in chapters 12-14. He explained the nature of the Spirit's gifts, their purposes, and the orderly manner in which they should be manifested in the church.

Occupying the center of Paul's instructions, chapter 13 exalts love as the greatest measure of spirituality and the ultimate guide to the exercise of spiritual gifts. Paul stated clearly that he valued all of the gifts, but those gifts are worthless if not used in love. The phrase "tongues of men and of angels" (v. 1) refers to two kinds of tongues. The "tongues of men" are languages that can be understood by humans—languages like English, Spanish, and French. The "tongues of angels" are languages that cannot be understood by humans. These tongues can only be understood by believers who are given the interpretation (12:10; 14:26) by the Holy Spirit. The gift of speaking in tongues was desired by the Corinthians, and those who spoke in tongues were esteemed highly. As wonderful as these tongues are, Paul said without love, a person who speaks in tongues is no more than a "noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (13:1 ESV).

The Corinthian believers also took great pride in manifesting gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and faith. Apparently, the Corinthian believers considered the gifts to be affirmations of their personal worth. Even today, speakers who claim prophetic gifts and secret knowledge are able to gather great crowds of Christians who seem unconcerned about the speakers' Christian character. Paul explained that in themselves these gifts do not add to our worth—we are "nothing" without love (v. 2). Early Christians were known for their sacrificial generosity. They cared for widows and orphans, and they often sold their possessions and donated the money to the poor. The most radical sacrifice is to

give one's life for the Gospel. However, without love, even our most extreme sacrifices will bring us no reward (v. 3).

Although the spiritual gifts are valuable, they are not more important than Christian character; and they cannot replace the fruit of the Spirit. The work of God always occurs in the context of love because God is love; therefore, the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit must always be motivated and guided by love. Furthermore, people who exercise the more conspicuous gifts should not be exalted above other members of the body of Christ whose gifts often go unnoticed. Every part of the body is necessary and of equal worth in God's eyes (12:26).

§ *Describe the proper relationship between love and spiritual gifts.*

B. The Greatest Commandments (Matthew 22:36-40)

36 Master, which is the great commandment in the law? 37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

The Apostle Paul's appreciation for love was grounded in the teachings of Jesus, who declared the command to love God is the greatest of all the commandments. One of the Pharisees sought to entrap Jesus with a trick question. The Pharisees were the conservative Jews who were devoted to faithful observance of the Law of Moses, and they were highly respected by the majority of Jews in Palestine. The Pharisee who approached Jesus is called a "lawyer," which does not mean "attorney" as it does today; rather, it refers to a person who was devoted to the study and teaching of the Law of Moses. In Jesus' day, the Jews taught there were 613 commandments in the Law; and this teacher asked Jesus which one of these 613 was the "greatest" (v. 36 NIV). The word *great* means "most

important”; therefore, the Pharisee was asking, “Of all the 613 commandments, which is the most important for us to obey?”

Without hesitation, Jesus replied the most important is the command to love God; and the second most important is the command to love one’s neighbor. Quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus said our love for God must encompass our entire being. The words “with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matt. 22:37) do not mean love can be divided into separate compartments. The three terms used together mean, “You shall love the Lord your God in all that you think and feel and do”; or, “You shall love the Lord your God completely.”

The second greatest commandment is taken from Leviticus 19:18. In a literal sense, “neighbor” refers to someone who lives nearby. However, Jesus interpreted the word to mean anyone who comes near to us. This meaning is clear from His parable of the Good Samaritan. Therefore, we are to love everyone we encounter; and we are to love them as we love ourselves. Jesus explained the meaning of this commandment in what we have come to know as the “Golden Rule,” which states, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31 NIV).

The commands to love God and to love our neighbor are the two most important commands because all of the other commandments are extensions of these two. Jesus said, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:40). Going beyond the 613 laws in the Law of Moses, Jesus included the writings of the prophets. Thus, the writings of Moses and all of the prophets are commentaries on the commands to love God and to love one another.

Jesus’ teaching means the essence of Christianity is relational; that is, how we relate to God and to each other. Genuine Christian faith cannot exist in a vacuum, apart from our relationships to God and to the people around us. This is where the Corinthian church failed, and it is where we often fail today.

Love in the Waiting Room

The intensive-care waiting room is different from any other place in the world. And the people who wait are different. They can't do enough for each other. No one is rude. The distinctions of race and class melt away. A person is a father first, a black man second. The garbage man loves his wife as much as the university professor loves his, and everyone understands this. Each person pulls for everyone else.

Could we learn to love like that if we realized every day of life is a day in the waiting room?—

Wes Seeliger, *One Inch From the Fence*

2. THE RULE AND POWER OF LOVE

A. Love Does No Harm (Romans 13:8-10)

8 Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. 9 For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 10 Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Jesus said love is a “commandment”; and here in Romans 13, Paul adds love is a debt we “owe” each other (v. 8). To *owe* means “to be obligated, to be indebted.” Paul advises believers not to get ourselves in debt; yet we must always recognize our obligation to love one another. Love is not optional for the Christian; it is a debt we must pay every day and to every person.

It is not unusual to have questions about decisions we must make, especially in regard to the treatment of other people. How do we respond to criticism? How do we help others? What do we say to hurting people? How do we guide our children? In all cases, the correct answer is “love.”

Acting in love means we seek what is best for others. It means to treat others like we want them to treat us. Relating to others in love, Paul says, fulfills the requirements of God's law.

God's moral law is summarized in what we call the Ten Commandments. Both Jesus and Paul said all of the Law, including the Ten Commandments (and "any other commandment," v. 9), is fulfilled in the law of love. The simplicity of Paul's teaching, however, can be disconcerting for a person who is spiritually immature and who feels the need to have a long list of rules. Paul was not entirely opposed to lists of rules (see Gal. 5:14-26). However, he used such lists only as examples; they were not meant to be comprehensive. The key to faithful Christian ethics is to be "led by the Spirit" (v. 18 NKJV). When we seek after God, study His Word, listen to the counsel of other believers, and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, we will be guided "into all truth" (John 16:13).

Paul stated, "Love does no harm" (Rom. 13:10 NKJV), a statement similar to the one that is taught to all medical students—"First, do no harm." In essence, Paul explained whenever we are in a situation that requires us to discern the correct, loving action, we must act in a way that does no harm to our neighbor.

§ *Why does God obligate His followers to love others, and how much must we love them?*

B. Characteristics of Love (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, 5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; 6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; 7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

We may affirm love is the greatest commandment and our highest obligation to each other; but how do we know if we are displaying love? What are the characteristics of love? How is love

defined? In order to teach the Corinthians (and us) the nature of genuine, godly love, Paul wrote a profound exposition on love in verses 4-13.

First, Paul said, “Love suffers long and is kind” (v. 4a NKJV), thus expressing two aspects of love (longsuffering and kindness) we discussed in lesson 10 as fruits of the Spirit. *Longsuffering* is essentially the quality of being patient when we are injured or provoked by others; and *kindness* is an attitude of graciousness and mercy rather than severity and harshness.

Furthermore, “love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud” (v. 4b NIV). *Envy* is the “painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage” (*Merriam-Webster*). Boasting and pride go hand-in-hand with envy. These self-centered evils can be illustrated by something I experienced in the church. Regarding a woman whom I had selected as a speaker, a man said to me, “What did she ever do to deserve this?” He also implied he should have been chosen over her.

Paul continued to describe love by stating things it does not do: love “does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil” (v. 5 NKJV). The phrase “thinks no evil” means it does not keep a record of being wronged; that is, it does not hold a grudge.

Verse 6 is a contrast. Paul said love “does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” (ESV). Love does not take pleasure in the suffering of others (even enemies).

Verse 7 lists four positive qualities of love: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (ESV). To “bear” all things means love never gives up and it puts up with opposition and difficulties. To “believe” all things means it “never stops believing God.” This does not mean love is so naïve that it cannot discern between truth and falsehood. This verse could be translated, “Love enables us to endure everything; it enables us in every circumstance to keep on

believing, to keep our confidence in God, and to remain patient no matter what happens to us” (Paul Ellingworth, *A Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*).

Love Like Christ Loved

The person who doesn't deserve love actually needs love more, not less. If you know someone unworthy of love, that's great! You now have a chance to emulate Christ, because the essence of His love is unconditional.—Tony Evans

3. LOVE ENDURES FOREVER

A. Love Never Fails (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. 9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

Having described love both in negative terms (what love does not do) and in positive terms (what love does), Paul then contrasted the eternal value of love with the temporary value of spiritual gifts, writing, “Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away” (1 Cor. 13:8 NIV). The Greek says, “Love never falls” (*pipto*), which is an odd expression for us, and that is why translators used the word *fails*. The Greek word can mean “fall (down) from a higher point,” “fall to pieces, collapse, go down,” “be destroyed,” in a moral sense “be completely ruined,” “fall under condemnation,” “perish” (Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*); “fall in ruins,” “to fail, become null and void” (Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary*); “to err,” “to lapse” (Sophocles, *Greek Lexicon*). Love does *not* “fall” in any sense of the word; therefore, “love never fails.”

We should notice Paul did not say, “Love will never fail” (future tense); rather, he said, “Love never fails”—present tense. The statements that follow, however, are all in the future: prophecies “will cease”; tongues “will be stilled”; and the gift of knowledge “will pass away” (v. 8 NIV). Spiritual gifts are temporal; that is, they are valuable only for a certain time; but love is everlasting, belonging to the eternal present.

The spiritual gifts have a purpose, and that purpose will be completed when “that which is perfect has come” (v. 10 NKJV), meaning when Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom. Until His return, the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will continue to be valuable ministries of the Spirit for the upbuilding of the body of Christ (14:12).

Measure of Maturity

Giftedness is not the measure of maturity; the display of love is. Each Christian must ask themselves: Am I exercising God’s gift out of love, in order to glorify Him and bless others, or do I have a secret motive or desire to enhance myself, to receive human praise, to cover up some deep personal problem, or to appear more spiritual than others? We must allow the Holy Spirit to purify our motives. We must do all things, and respond to all situations, out of love.—J. Ayodeji Adewuya

B. Love Is Supreme (1 Corinthians 13:11-13)

11 When I was a child, I spake 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 through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. 13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Paul compared the coming of Christ to his own growth in life (v. 11). At one time, Paul was a child; but then he grew to be a man. When he was a child, he acted like a child; but, when he became

a man, he acted with maturity. Similarly, we are now like children in regard to our understanding of God. We know a few things, but our knowledge of God is as limited as a child's understanding of life. When Christ comes, however, we will become mature in our understanding, and we will know God perfectly.

The contrast between this age and the future Kingdom age is also illustrated by the symbol of the mirror. Ancient mirrors were made of polished iron or brass, and even the best of them would give an imperfect and distorted reflection. Similarly, our current knowledge is “partial and incomplete” (v. 12 NLT) because our vision of God is only a reflection. One day, we will see God “face to face,” and we will know Him perfectly.

Coming back to his main subject, Paul affirms the lasting, eternal value of “faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (v. 13 NKJV). Although our understanding is limited, we know love never fails. Although our vision of God is imperfect, we know His love never fails. Where there is God, there is love.

§ *How do faith, hope, and love work together in the believer's life (see Gal. 5:5-6; Col. 1:4-5)?*

CHOOSE TO LOVE

We have a choice—we can choose to walk in the Spirit; and, by walking in the Spirit, we will show forth the love of Christ to a lost and dying world. We affirm “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). God does not love at a distance. He came down to walk and talk with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8). He came down in a burning bush to commune with Moses (Ex. 3:2). He came down to win the victory for Deborah and Barak (Judg. 5:4). He came down to fill Solomon's temple with His glory (2 Chron. 7:1). God came down to inhabit human flesh and to suffer and die for us (John 1:10-17; Phil. 2:5-9). God does not love at a distance, and neither should we.

Daily Devotions

- M. Love at All Times (Exodus 23:1-9)
- T. Love Covers All Sins (Proverbs 10:6-12)
- W. Angered by God's Love (Jonah 4:1-11)
- T. Love God Wholeheartedly (Mark 12:28-34)
- F. Encourage Others to Love (Hebrews 10:19-25)
- S. Love One Another (1 John 3:11-18)