

The Way of Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most famous and recognizable chapters in the whole Bible. In fact, it is one of those chapters that you could very easily find several people of different faith traditions all agreeing on its general content. But it isn't a chapter that is about ambiguous love or a universalist moral appeal; it is about the power of Godly love. It flows in sequence with the rest of the letter and continues Paul's warnings and exhortations against pride, arrogance, divisions, and rivalries. These things can't and won't exist if love is the primary driver, according to Paul. But, in Paul's mind, Christ is the center of it all. It is to Jesus that we look to see as the embodiment of this noble, eternal, and excellent way of love. When we follow Jesus' example by walking in the Spirit and extending Godly love, we will come to see that **Godly love transforms hearts and minds.**

1. Love

- a. Coming out of chapter 12. → A fruitful tension.
 - i. How do we wrestle with this list? (12:27-31)
 1. Every gift is needed for health and effectiveness.
 2. Not every gift is the same.
 3. The goal is unity (mission and fellowship) and effectiveness (evangelism and discipleship).
 - ii. **Let's ask the question – Is Paul ranking the gifts? → Yes & No**
 1. **Why, then, does Paul rank the first three? That is more difficult to answer, but it is almost certainly related to his own conviction as to the role these three ministries play in the church. It is not so much that one is more important than the other, nor that this is necessarily their order of authority, but that one has precedence over the other in the founding and building up of the local assembly.** In light of 14:17 and the probability that those who have taken the lead against Paul are considered “prophets,” one is tempted to see here a subordinating of such people to the apostle, who is giving them “the Lord's command” (14:37) over against their “prophets.” It is perhaps noteworthy that none of these “ranked persons” is *addressed* in this letter, nor are they assumed to be “in charge” of the worship, which according to these texts is still under the sovereign authority of the Spirit.¹
 - iii. **Fruitful tension – Paul reminds us of a few things in this passage that are going to lead us into fruitful tension.**
 1. **Gifts aren't for consumers – They are for servants.**
 - a. Gifts are given for the building up of the church. We have talked about this as “mission and movement” not “buildings and programs.”

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 619–622.

2. **Effectively using my gifts requires my willing cooperation with the Holy Spirit.**
 - a. Don't forget that the gifts are given by the Spirit. That means we are to cooperate with the Spirit in the usage of our gifts.
 3. **Humility must be the primary posture of any servant.**
 - a. If your gift is given to you for your service, then humility must move us to use our gifts. Again, the problem of pride isn't just a them issue, it is something that we all struggle with.
- b. **What is love?** → A persistent concern for someone's greatest good and the willingness to serve them towards that end.
- i. **Love.** A central virtue in most ethical traditions, one that denotes an attitude toward another involving both an affection for and a deep commitment to the other. In the Christian tradition, love (especially agape) is an expression of the essential nature of God, the central characterization of the relationship between God and humans, and the chief virtue that is to characterize Christians in their relationships to God and one another, as shaped by the indwelling Holy Spirit. **The connection between love and God's own character gives rise to the Christian focus on love as the fundamental characteristic of Christian discipleship and hence of Christian ethics.**²
 - ii. In fact, many philosophers and sociologists think of love as the primary or highest virtue of an ethically centered life.
 1. Consider the way we talk about care for the planet, the displaced, our political institutions, and even justice itself. All of these are paired with love as the central value. I.e., If you love this, then you will...
- c. **Love is a tricky word in our context.**
- i. **Culturally** – Love is often equated to not limiting someone's expression or being permissive in order to limit pain and enable self-expression or self-discovery.
 - ii. **Biblically** – Love is exclusively tied up with the character and nature of God.³
 1. **Benevolence, Grace, Mercy, Persistence**
 - a. When we think in terms of God's moral attributes, perhaps what comes first to mind is the cluster of attributes we are here classifying as love. Many regard it as the basic attribute, the very nature or definition of God. The basic dimensions of God's love to us are (1) benevolence, (2) grace, (3) mercy, and (4) persistence.
 2. **Love and goodness go hand in hand.**
 - a. Looking at Jn. 3:16 – Out of love God sent his son so that humanity might again experience the goodness of a right relationship with God.
 3. **Love and serving go hand in hand.**
 - a. Again, let's go back to Mk. 10:45 – The Son of Man (God) did not come to be served, but came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.
 4. Results in –
 - a. **Goodness** – The experience of what is truly good.
 - b. **Justice** – The restoration of a wrong, specifically, to be made whole.
 - c. **Growth** – Formation into something new.
 - i. **“Love in the biblical sense, then, is not merely indulging someone near at hand. Rather, it inherently involves justice as**

² Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 72.

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 266.

well. This means there will be a concern for the ultimate welfare of all humanity, a passion to do what is right, and enforcement of appropriate consequences for wrong action.”⁴

- ii. “Christians are commanded to love their neighbors. In fulfilling that obligation one will undoubtedly consider whether specific act in a particular situation is just and benevolent to the neighbor - to do so seems necessary in view of what it means to love someone. But what makes the loving act morally good is not that it is benevolent or just, but that God commanded it. To summarize: what makes an act an act of love is at least in part that it exemplifies benevolence and justice. What makes such a loving act moral is that it obeys God's command to love.”⁵

d. Remember the context of the letter.

- i. The main problems in Corinth – Pride, arrogance, partisanship, and division have caused massive problems in the church.
- ii. Spiritual gifts – “The more excellent way.” → Love
 1. Remember that they had over inflated the gift of tongues as the preeminent spiritual gift. This is partly why Paul orders the gifts to give them a measure of humility. He puts tongues last in his ordering list in chapter 12.
- iii. **Tom Schreiner – “Gifts build up the church, but love is superior since the goal and aim of the gifts is love. Gifts communicate God’s power and presence, but love revels in relationship, finding its joy in the presence of the beloved.”⁶**
 1. Verses 4–7 describe love in action and attitude, helping readers to discern the nature of genuine love. Certainly we do not have an exhaustive list here but one that is representative. The centrality of love in the Pauline ethic is evident. Love is the goal of his teaching (1 Tim. 1:5), and all the instructions of the law can be summarized in the command to love one’s neighbor (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14). In fact, all the virtues are bound up with love (Col. 3:14). When Paul begins a list of virtues, we are not surprised to see that he begins with love (Rom. 12:9; Gal. 5:22). When it comes to which foods one may eat, love considers the good of fellow-believers (Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:1–3), which helps explain why Paul says, ‘Do everything in love’ (1 Cor. 16:14). Love, after all, expresses the love Christ demonstrated in giving his life for the sake of human beings; thus believers should also live in a loving way (Eph. 5:2; cf. 1 Thess. 4:10).⁷

2. Humility

a. What is humility?

- i. As the old saying goes, “It is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less often.”
- ii. It is the virtue of having a rightsized perspective of yourself and being other-oriented.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 267–268.

⁵ Feinberg, John S., and Paul D. Feinberg. *Ethics for a Brave New World*. 2nd ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 272–273.

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 275.

- b. The difference between being humble and naïve.
 - i. When it comes to the body illustration and the understanding of spiritual gifts, we have three choices, pride or humility. Humility however, can actually be disguised as being naïve.
 - ii. **Pride** - Their pride has led them to disastrous realities that we have seen over and over again in the letter. Now, we come to learn with the spiritual gifts conversation that their pride drove them to overvalue and distort the gift of tongues.
- c. **Everything but love will pass away. (v.8)**
 - i. Humility is grounded in this whole section. When we are consumed with pride, we strive and strive and strive to receive only temporary rewards. But when we operate in humility, we are able to see the bigger picture (now and eternity) and that allows us to operate in a far more secure and lasting way.
 - 1. Paul is reminding the Corinthians of the way that is truly lasting, that is the way of love. But, it isn't love ambiguously, it is love that is rooted and centered in Christ.
 - 2. The theme of this section is that love is everlasting; hence Paul begins by affirming that *Love never fails*, which means 'Love never ends' (NRSV). Love stands in contrast, then, to spiritual gifts, which are temporary. Prophecies and knowledge 'will come to an end' (NRSV) and tongues 'will cease' (NRSV). The words 'will come to an end' come from a verb (*katargeō*) which is often used in eschatological contexts in Paul (e.g. Rom. 6:6; 7:6; 1 Cor. 2:6; 15:24, 26; 2 Cor. 3:7, 11, 13, 14; Eph. 2:5; 2 Thess. 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:10). The eschatological context here is the coming of Christ—the day when the partial 'come[s] to an end' (*katargēthēsetai*, NRSV).⁸
 - ii. **How does this truth inform the way that I see myself relating to others, to God, and even the eternal nature of my days?**
 - 1. This shouldn't make me respond by feeling that what I do is fleeting or worthless. Instead, it should ground me by focusing me on eternity.
 - a. In the movie, *The Gladiator*, the main character, Maximus Decimus Meridius, says, "What we do in life echoes in eternity." He says this in the face of certain death of the gladiatorial games. In the movie, this saying is inspiring but ultimately fleeting. However, in Paul's words, what do we in this life does echo into eternity, particularly when we do it in Christlike love.
 - 2. **To others** – Love is patient, kind, doesn't keep a record of wrongs... etc.
 - a. An eternal perspective should cause me to see others not as problems to be solved or conflicts to avoid. Instead, we are to see others as people who deserve love that is eternal.
 - 3. **To God** – My life is to honor God is all that I do. Remember back in chapter 10 when Paul was talking about honoring the Lord? He said it this way, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (cf. 10:31)
 - a. God is the one who first extended this kind of love to you and me. My relationship with him isn't performative, it is founded and realized in grace. Just as Schreiner said, "love revels in relationship." God loved us so that we could revel in relationship with him.

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 278–279.

4. **The eternal nature of my days.** – This does not mean that my individual days are eternal, but that you and me as humans are eternal beings.
 - a. We get so caught up in the hustle and grind of our individual days that we are so quickly prone to forget that we are not living for right now, but that we are living for eternity.

3. Maturity

- a. Maturity is not optional.
 - i. This is an idea that we have talked about throughout the 1 Corinthians series. Paul expects the Corinthians and all believers to walk and grow in maturity. This goes all the way back to 1 Cor. 1:2, when Paul uses the word, sanctified. It means an ongoing and increasing conformity to Christ. i.e., Growing in maturity.
 - ii. Here are three important reminders when it comes to maturity.
 1. **Maturity takes time.** – It doesn't happen overnight.
 2. **Maturity requires willing cooperation.** – It isn't going to be accidental. You actually have to cooperate with the Spirit of God for growth and maturity.
 3. **Maturity needs others.** – The whole context of the letter has been to believers in community. We don't grow very well without other people, specifically other mature believers.
 - iii. Pride is evidence of immaturity.
 1. If love is about mature and generous service. Pride is an expression of immaturity. They were immature and prideful... remember the whole "spiritual milk" comment from Paul back in chapter 3? Their lack of love and presence of pride is only more evidence of their immaturity.
- b. **How do we grow in maturity?**
 - i. **My intentions and motivations** – v. 3 "Without love I gain nothing."
 1. Giving up one's own life may seem to be loving, but it is not loving if one does so to boast about one's sacrificial spirit. Love cannot be restricted to actions alone but also has to do with motives and intentions.⁹
 - ii. **My thought life** - "I gave up childish ways."
 1. What do you dwell on?
 - iii. **My responses** – "Love is patient, kind, and enduring."
 1. What do my responses look like now that I am following Jesus in a life-defining way?
 - iv. **My faith** – "I know in part now. I will know in full then. I am fully known."
 1. Faith is a forward-looking trust that is rooted in God's faithful past provision.

⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 275.