



Lesson Seven

CHRISTIAN LOVE

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 13–14

MAIN IDEA

More than a human emotion, Christian love is a verb. When we practice love, we grow in our understanding of Christ's sacrifice for all and in our ability to live according to his way.

OPENING PRAYER

*Spirit of love,
Help us remember that when we seek to love you,
each other, and ourselves,
this impulse is a sign of your grace moving in us.
When we fall short, you enable us to start again.
What a mercy that you continue to abide with us.
What a joy that you always will.
Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

In chapters 13–14, Paul describes the love that lies at the heart of the way of Jesus Christ. In his willingness to submit to crucifixion for our sake, Jesus Christ embodied love. Now, Paul exhorts his siblings in Corinth to behave with love toward one another, implicitly contrasting the way of love with the behaviors he critiqued in earlier sections of the letter.

Today, Christians might think of love as a feeling, or we might see the love Paul describes as reserved for the very closest relationships. Think, for example, of how often his hymn to love is read at weddings. Paul, however, was writing primarily about how members of the Christian community are called to treat each other. Love builds up the community, as do the spiritual gifts of prophesying, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues—gifts that seem stranger to many (but by no means all) Christians today than they apparently did in Paul’s time.

Chapter 14 contains one passage that has been used to silence women in churches, but as we shall see, it very likely was neither written by Paul nor originally a part of this letter.

LESSON

What is often called Paul’s “hymn to love” is among many Christians’ favorite Bible passages. It offers a multifaceted view of what love looks like in practice. Love as Paul describes it is a verb, not a feeling; it is a set of behaviors for Christians to adopt, emulating our savior. And we don’t practice those behaviors alone. The fact that Paul expressed this view of love in a letter to a whole church is important. Christian community can be likened to a school, a gym, or a music studio—any venue where people learn

skills and practice them diligently, and to which they keep returning. By practicing together, disciples of Jesus grow more adept at living according to his way of love.

A point we have already seen, but one that is easy to overlook, is that Paul writes these words about love to a factionalized church in conflict. He has already rebuked them for their failure to love in ways that reflect the glory of Christ. Without naming names, Paul lists characteristics of love that are the opposite of the failings for which he has already rebuked the Corinthians. “Love . . . is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way . . .” (13:4–5). Who among his audience could fail to hear an echo, for example, of his three rebukes of their arrogance (or the arrogance of some among them, anyway), in chapters four and five?

Intentional Practice of Love

Even in less fraught situations than the Corinthian conflicts, loving our siblings in Christ can feel challenging. It’s simply the case that all members of even a local church don’t necessarily particularly like each other, never mind all members of an entire denomination. Sometimes, we get on each other’s nerves. The fact that we serve on committees, work in the kitchen, or develop children’s programming together can sometimes make us appreciate each other. At other times, working together can try our patience. But Paul is not writing about whether or not Christians like each other. He’s not writing about how we feel. He’s writing about how we are called to behave as Christians. And he is assuring us that as we practice love, Jesus Christ is present.

Here is an exercise to try: for “love” in 13:4–8, try substituting “Jesus” or “God.” Reading “Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind . . .” may help you remember that we practice these behaviors for the sake of Jesus Christ, whose sacrificial life embodied love, and whose resurrected presence helps us behave in loving ways. And it may help you remember that these ways of love are a practice that orients us toward love of God and of our neighbor, rather than a checklist by which we are constantly being graded. When we fall short in our practice, as we will, we can ask forgiveness from God and our neighbor, and ask their help to start again.¹

Before you started this Bible study, did you realize Paul’s words about love were written to a church in conflict? Does knowing this change the way you hear that passage?

Simply Love

The central message of the thirteenth chapter, the kernel to hold onto, is the primacy of love. Paul uses hyperbole to paint a picture of various things Christians could do that would be fundamentally worthless if they were done without love. “If I . . . understand *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge, and if I have *all* faith, so as to remove mountains . . . If I give away *all* my possessions, and if I *hand over my body* . . . but do not have love, I gain nothing” (13:2–3, emphasis added). In chapter 12, Paul had just listed being an apostle, teaching, and “deeds of power” among God’s gifts to the church. And yet, he followed

those comments by saying he would show his Corinthian siblings “a still more excellent way.” That is the way of love, the divine gift that, unlike the others, “never ends” (13:8).

Paul’s comments here are reminiscent of an exchange in the book of the prophet Micah, between a hypothetical Israelite who seeks to be faithful, and the prophet speaking for God (6:6–8):

“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands
of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”

The questioner uses hyperbole in imagining lavish, even ludicrous sacrifices. The prophet answers simply that justice, kindness, and humility are what God truly desires. These are essential components of Paul’s description of love.

What are some ways you treat others with love for the sake of Jesus Christ, regardless of how you might feel about the person with whom you are interacting?

¹ I elaborate on this idea in “Do Everything in Love,” *Horizons: The Magazine for Presbyterian Women* (Summer 2024), 5–7.

Contradictory Words About Women

Having read Paul's thoughts about women covering their heads while prophesying or praying in church (11:5), which takes for granted that women will do both, readers are surprised by the instruction in 14:34 that "women should be silent in the churches." There is a clear contradiction between 14:34–35 and everything else Paul has said about women in this letter. Instead, these verses echo what are now called the pastoral epistles, which were written later (see 1 Timothy 2:11–12 and Titus 2:5). Given the contradiction with the rest of First Corinthians, and the similarity to the pastoral epistles, many biblical scholars believe that the people who wrote those letters inserted these verses into copies of First Corinthians decades after the letter left Paul's hands.² Another argument for those verses having been inserted later is this: If we read First Corinthians, skipping verses 33b (starting with "as in all the churches of the saints") through verse 36, we see that Paul's words and argument about prophecy flow smoothly without those few verses.

As New Testament scholar Charles L. Campbell points out, knowing that these verses were likely inserted later, by someone other than Paul but claiming his authority, doesn't change the fact that they are part of the Bible, and "have been used to oppress women throughout church history, and . . . today."³ What you and I can do now is interpret these verses in light of the rest of First Corinthians, which affirms women's gifts and calls all Christians to prioritize the

well-being of the whole community. Using the whole of scripture to interpret particular verses of scripture requires time and care (more so than simply cherry-picking verses or proof-texting) but it is more conducive to the practice of love and building up the body of Christ that Paul encourages for all of us.

What do you do with passages like 14:34–35 that have been used to silence women in churches? What happens when you place it in conversation with chapter 11, about women prophesying and praying in church, and chapter 12, about the diversity of spiritual gifts?

The Cross Points Us to Love

Paul's emphasis on the cross is another theological point that has been misused to justify abuse and oppression. Paul is pointing to the cross of Jesus Christ specifically as God's instrument of redemption. Jesus Christ's resurrection after being crucified demonstrates God's loving yet rebuking power over the forces in the world that seek to harm, enslave, or destroy God's people. Paul is not saying that every instance of suffering has value in and of itself. Certainly, no Christian should impose suffering on another person, or other people, in Jesus' name. Rather, Paul assures us that when Christians make sacrifices—and possibly suffer—out of love for God and neighbor, we will be emulating Jesus.

² Charles L. Campbell, *1 Corinthians*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 241. Virtually all New Testament scholars believe the pastoral epistles (Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy) were written at the end of the first century or very early in the second century. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 639, 654, 673.

³ Campbell, *1 Corinthians*, 242.

Sharing what we have, putting others first, forgoing privileges and comforts because by doing so we can witness to Jesus Christ and/or serve our neighbors: this is the kind of suffering Paul points to. This is not the kind of suffering we see in the abuse of vulnerable people, like children, elders, or people with disabilities. Nor is it a command to endure abuse like intimate partner violence or sexual assault. Countless women have been told to endure “their cross” rather than seeking separation or divorce, receiving protection from their abuser, or seeing him disciplined by the church. That is a harmful misapplication of Paul’s theology of the cross, and Christians must continue to share this truth.

Has your church ever experienced a conflict in which factions developed and were difficult, or seemed impossible, to bridge? How did the church address the conflict? What was helpful, or not helpful?

Speaking in Tongues

Much of chapter 14 deals with the spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues and interpreting such speech. This section of the letter might now seem bizarre and irrelevant, or validating and encouraging, depending on whether or not the twenty-first-century reader believes they have experienced or witnessed something like the phenomena Paul discusses.

I say “something like” because, as in several parts of this letter, we can’t be sure exactly what Paul is describing. He acknowledges “various kinds of tongues” (12:28) as a gift of the Spirit,

but he contrasts “those who speak in a tongue” unfavorably with “those who prophesy.” The former “do not speak to other people but to God” (14:2), while the latter “speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (14:3). The former “build up themselves,” while the latter “build up the church” (14:4). Speaking in tongues may have been another source of divisions within the church at Corinth. Paul goes to some lengths to warn his siblings against speaking “not intelligible” words that others will not understand. He compares unintelligible tongues to “lifeless instruments,” to simply “speaking into the air,” and remaining “a foreigner” to those to whom one speaks (14:7–11). Reading between the lines, it seems that perhaps those Corinthians who spoke in tongues were raising themselves above those who didn’t, because they had received this esoteric gift. Other people’s inability to understand these utterances was supposedly an indication that they lacked spiritual gifts; God had not favored them. Paul, however, brings the Corinthians back to the primary importance of “building up the church” (14:12).

Convinced as he was that the Lord’s return was near, Paul may have been thinking of the prophet Joel’s words about the final days:

“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit”
(Joel 2:28–29).

Prophets receive messages for the good of their people, in this case, the whole church. “If there

is no one to interpret” a tongue, “let them be silent in church” (14:28). When prophets speak, “let the others weigh what is said” (14:29). The exercise of no spiritual gift is to be forbidden but, Paul closes out this section, “all things should be done decently and in order” (14:40). What constitutes “decent” behavior “in order,” without squelching the exercise of God-given gifts, remains a matter for Christians to discern.

TAKEAWAY

Paul wrote his meditation on love to a church in conflict, reminding them that love is a matter of how we treat each other. In all our relationships, when we seek to behave with love, and when we respect the gifts and contributions of each person, Jesus Christ is present to help us.

How does a church determine whether a particular gift is building up the church or not? How does the church know whether it might be time to retire a particular ministry that may have outlived its calling? How does an individual member know when it's time to let a ministry of theirs go, and how might siblings in Christ help discern that—or initiate a challenging conversation, if needed?



United through Christ pendant/charm

Embrace in Unity, from lesson 7, examines the deep human need for connection, understanding, and harmony. Through a skillful balance of form, color, and emotion, Saykuthonie (Stephanie M. Patterson)'s artwork shows the beauty that appears when differences fade in the warmth of shared humanity. Wear (or give) this pendant as a reminder that unity starts with the simple act of embracing each other.

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Embrace in Unity, Saykuthonie