

# What Is Love?

It is commonly observed that 1 Cor 13 is conveniently divided into three sections.

Vss 1-3 state the necessity and preeminence of love above all spiritual gifts.

Vss 4-7 describe the qualities of love

Vss 8-13 state the durability and endurance of love.

1 Cor 13, familiarly known as the Love Chapter, is one of the most popular passages of scripture in all the New Testament, or even the entire Bible. By far, the greatest number of times it is read and studied as a stand-alone passage, that is, completely ignoring the context. To be fair, the chapter has the depth to stand by itself. However, we fail to glean a very important feature of this passage if we never take a close look at its contextual significance.

## I. The Preeminence of Love

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

- A. Tongues
- B. Prophecy
- C. Special understanding, enlightenment, ability to teach deep truths
- D. Faith that can move mountains
- E. Giving sacrificially, even offering one's own life.

No punches pulled here. No misunderstanding Paul's message. Paul clearly, emphatically says the gifts of the Spirit are meaningless if not governed by love. The most eloquent gift of tongues that could speak the most obscure languages on earth or even the languages of angels would be a worthless gift if devoid of love.

The ability to process the deepest mysteries of the world, or possessing faith that could dislodge mountains would be worthless without love. Even the person who would be willing to give their body sacrificially would be making a wasted gift if not motivated by love.

Love rules. Period. I have seen some people with the personality of a rattlesnake pretend they were operating in the gifts of the Spirit. They impress a few people, but I agree with Paul. They are no more valuable than the noise created by banging on cheap cymbal.

## II. The Profile of Love

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup>It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

# What Is Love?

The world doesn't understand what love is. They confuse love with lust. They confuse love with kindness. They confuse love with infatuation. They confuse love with biological urges. They confuse love with adoration. . They love their house. They love their car. They love their pet. They love the last movie they saw. They love their favorite restaurant. They love their privacy. But in none of these do they remotely understand 1 Corinthians 13 love.

Interestingly, Paul defines love, not as an abstract concept, but as a function. Love is not what you say, or what you feel. It is what you do. This is what Jesus taught.

One commentator summarized the definition of love according to 1 Cor 13 like this: "Love is first of all an action, an unconditional commitment, a promise that is never broken."

Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." To love God is to make an unconditional commitment to Him, to keep your vow to Him to serve Him until you die. We understand love better by studying what love always does, and what love never does.

## A. What love never does

### 1. Love does not envy. (vs 4)

The congregation at the church of Corinth were guilty of envy and strife. That is why Paul used the body analogy to illustrate how inappropriate it is for the foot to envy the hand and say, "Because I am not the hand, I am not important." It was envy of other members of the body and insecurity for not feeling as important as others.

### 2. Love does not boast (is not arrogant; is not puffed up.) (vs 4)

Paul lands another solid strike at the Corinthians. They boasted in men. They were boastful about having special knowledge. Paul already told them in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up

### 3. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices in truth. (vs 6)

The Corinthians not only refused to discipline the adulterer in their congregation, they celebrated their tolerance and kept the man in full fellowship. They employed the world's court system to settle disputes within the church. They desecrated the temple of God by defiling their bodies.

### 4. Love is not self-seeking. Yet so much of the dispute among the Corinthians was a result of people looking out for their own self interest above others.

### 5. Not easily angered

### 6. Keeps no record of wrongs

## B. What love always does

### 1. Patient

### 2. Kind

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3. Always protects
4. Always trusts
5. Always hopes
6. Always perseveres

Some have observed that Jesus is the perfect embodiment of love and we can substitute Jesus for the word “love” in verses 4-7.

<sup>4</sup>Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. He does not envy, He does not boast, He is not proud. <sup>5</sup>He does not dishonor others, He is not self-seeking, He is not easily angered, He keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Jesus does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>He always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

## III. The Permanence of Love

<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup>but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

### A. Temporary gifts for our temporary situation

1. Prophecies will cease
2. Knowledge will pass away

This is another powerful argument for why love is superior to all the other gifts – because it is eternal. All the other gifts are temporary. Eternal things intrinsically have greater value than temporary things.

The other gifts are finite. The reason they will cease is they are imperfect resources for people in an imperfect world. They are stop-gaps for us. They are tools to help get us there, but once we are there, they are valueless. They will have done their task, but they will be spent. Love will continue on into eternity. It doesn't fade with time. It is not limited to the realm of flesh and blood. In fact, what we know about love is but a taste of what eternal, Heavenly love is really all about.

We are not going to live in eternal glory rattling off messages in tongues. We are not going to spend eternity spouting prophetic messages. We are not going to spend eternity sharing great words of wisdom. But we will spend eternity loving God and loving each other. There will be no arguments. There will be no dissension. There will be no factions. In God's eternal house of love there is perfect peace. You won't have any bad neighbors. You won't squabble with relatives. Every person you meet will be someone you love with the deepest love we have never yet known on this earth.

### B. Toys for tots

<sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

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Why are people so enamored with the gifts of the Spirit? Of course they are good, and of course they are for us, and of course they are beneficial for our Christian journey. Anyone who spends all their energy pursuing the gifts but fails miserably in the first two commandments – loving God and loving others – are like irresponsible children who are mesmerized by the shiny toys but fail to appreciate items of great worth. Spiritual gifts have the potential to elevate one among their peers. But Paul would rather people labor in love for God and toward one another than to mishandle the gifts of the Spirit. People who don't know how to operate in love have no business seeking the gifts of the Spirit.

### C. When we see him face to face

<sup>12</sup>For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Right now, the best we can do is see “face to book.” What we know of God, we learn from His word. But “then” we will get the first “face to face” with God.

## IV. What Does It All Really Boil Down To?

<sup>13</sup> And now abide faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love.

### A. The other “trinity”

Now abides faith, hope, and charity. Although Paul emphasizes love as the most important virtue in our Christian walk, he concludes his “ode to love” by bringing in two other honorable mentions – faith and hope.

This was a favorite trio for Paul. He groups them together in other letters. 1 Thes 1:3; Col. 1:4-5; Eph 1:15-18.

In 1 Thes 5:8, he incorporated these three into the necessary armor Christians must wear. “Putting on faith and love as the breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.”

And the greatest of these is love.