

What is Love?

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Introduction

What is Love?: Our movies, books, and songs are filled with the pursuit and idolization of love. We search for love; we need love; we despair at love lost.

- Neurological research shows that the development of the brain (orbitofrontal cortex) is almost wholly dependent on the environment a child is nurtured in from birth to 24 months. Lack of love actually causes deficient brain development.¹
- If we all need love, if we all want to be “loving” people, then the question really starts with a definition: what *is* love? How do we know it? How do we show it?

Famous Passage: This longing for love explains why today’s passage resonates deeply with so many. The topic is captivating and the answer Paul gives in the midst of 1 Corinthians is (as one theologian described) “the greatest, strongest, deepest thing Paul ever wrote” (Harnack).

Context: But the point is not about romantic love or even marital love but love in all aspects (*agape*?). It certainly sets the paradigm for how one should love a spouse, but it applies to all believers in all relationships. Our “God is love” and, therefore, a lack of love is evidence that we don’t know God (1 Jn 4:8).

- The point Paul makes is **connected** to the problems at Corinth. They are self-absorbed and self-important and even use their religion as a means of self-advancement.
- *Picks up from the discussion of spiritual gifts (ch. 12) and will deal with the direct problems of their abuse of spiritual gifts (ch. 14).
- There’s a way to live and use your gifts from God for the good of others, **it’s the way of love** (not indiscriminate, follow your heart, sweet, and sentimental love, but rigorous and lasting love deeply rooted in the gospel of Jesus). This is the **more excellent way**.

Pressure: God has kindly met me in the words of this chapter. I’ve found them so powerful and glory-filled that I feel nervous that my clumsy words won’t convey their weight. But I’m reminded that the power is not in my presentation but in the Spirit of God that has inspired these words and promised to use them to accomplish His purposes and bring about His will in the hearts and minds of those who hear them. So I share them with humility and ask God to use them to transform us into the image of Christ.

I simply pray that God would give us a clear vision of his love and work in our lives to reflect that love to those around us, so that we would be a tangible expression of the love of Christ that draws others to him.

And I will show you a still more excellent way. ¹ If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,

¹ <https://drdavidhamilton.com/why-children-need-love-to-grow/>

but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ 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. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.²

1. The Missing Ingredient of Love (vv. 1-3)

Talky Talky: ¹ If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Paul is hitting at a particular problem in Corinth (speaking in tongues, cf. Ch. 14). Tongues being some sort of spiritual or angelic language that is unintelligible to human ears (14:2).

- The Corinthians thought this dynamic, ecstatic “gift” made them particular “spiritual.” They saw this practice as a sign of spiritual superiority (*next week). E.g. angelic dialect, cf. *Testament of Job*
- But it’s all of a bunch of noise if these “activities” are not done from a sincere place of love. All bark and no bite. The facade of godly activity but no true power (cf. 2 Tim 3:5). The most elegant sermon means nothing if I don’t *actually* love the people I pastor.

So Smart: ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, Paul is both giving a caution and a rebuke. He has already listed prophecy and knowledge as spiritual gifts (ch 12) and will go on to show the centrality and importance of prophecy in the church (ch 14). **But none of it matters without love.**

- The Corinthian church *prided* itself on knowledge and wisdom. But their wisdom was too often *worldly* wisdom (1:20) rather than the wisdom of the cross (1:17). Theirs was a knowledge full of human eloquence rather than God’s revelation.
- “It is a good thing to possess an accurate theology, but it is unsatisfactory unless that good theology also possesses us” (C. L. Mitton). “Theology is a map that should not be confused with the actual trip.” The end of “knowledge” and “spiritual wisdom and

² Καὶ ἔτι καθ’ ὑπερβολὴν ὁδὸν ὑμῖν δείκνυμι. ¹ Ἐὰν ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαλῶ καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, γέγονα χαλκὸς ἤχων ἢ κύμβαλον ἀλαλάζον. ² καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω προφητεῖαν καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθὲν εἶμι. ³ κἂν ψωμίσω πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντά μου καὶ ἐὰν παραδῶ τὸ σῶμά μου ἵνα καυχῶμαι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐδὲν ὠφελοῦμαι. ⁴ Ἡ ἀγάπη μακροθυμεῖ, χρηστεύεται ἡ ἀγάπη, οὐ ζηλοῖ, [ἡ ἀγάπη] οὐ περπερεύεται, οὐ φυσιοῦται, ⁵ οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖ, οὐ ζητεῖ τὰ ἑαυτῆς, οὐ παροξύνεται, οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν, ⁶ οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ. ⁷ πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει. ⁸ Ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε πίπτει· εἴτε δὲ προφητεῖαι, καταργηθήσονται· εἴτε γλώσσαι, παύσονται· εἴτε γνῶσις, καταργηθήσεται. ⁹ ἐκ μέρους γὰρ γινώσκομεν καὶ ἐκ μέρους προφητεύομεν· ¹⁰ ὅταν δὲ ἔλθῃ τὸ τέλειον, τὸ ἐκ μέρους καταργηθήσεται. ¹¹ ὅτε ἤμην νήπιος, ἐλάλουν ὡς νήπιος, ἐφρόνουν ὡς νήπιος, ἐλογιζόμην ὡς νήπιος· ὅτε γέγονα ἀνὴρ, κατήργηκα τὰ τοῦ νηπίου. ¹² βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι’ ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον· ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθῶς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην. ¹³ νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα· μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη.

understanding” is to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work” (Col 1:9-1).

- The Corinthians were more interested in **sounding** spiritual than **being** spiritual. They wanted to **appear** wise rather than actual **be** wise.

Gotta Have Faith: and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. Obvious parallels to Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed (demon-possessed son that the disciples couldn’t heal; Jesus explains to them that they lack faith). They don’t lack “a lot” of faith, cause all they need is “faith like a grain of mustard seed” and they’d be able to command mountains to be moved (Matt 17:20).

- The opposite of **little faith** isn’t **big faith**, the opposite of little faith is **great faith**, and what makes faith great is not its **size** but its **object**. **Hyperbole** in what Paul says (most people don’t have *much* faith *much less* “all” faith). **Lots of faith in the wrong thing is deadly; the little faith we have, fully placed in Jesus is the way of eternal life.** Having all the faith in the world if it’s in the wrong thing won’t do you any good. Neither will it matter if all your faith is lacking the indispensable ingredient — love.
- The most spiritually demonstrative are not guaranteed a place in the KoG. Jesus makes clear that some prophesied, cast out demons, and did “mighty works in [his] name” (Matt 7:22) but will not get into his kingdom. Spiritual presumption has no place in the economy of God. **We don’t enter his kingdom based on our performance but our humble dependence on him.** We don’t get in on our righteousness but on his.

Religious Behavior: ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned³, but have not love, I gain nothing. He gets more hyperbolic by describing giving away all one’s possessions or even one’s own life!

- Think of the rich young ruler who could claim to obey all the commands of God but was unwilling to “sell all” he had (Mark 10:21). We would think that someone who would go this far must be the most godly, but that’s not always the case. “Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7).

There are all sorts of ways to hate God. And one is to **use him instead of loving him**. Even religious behavior can be done with sinful motivations. **Do you genuinely treasure and love God or do you just want to move some mountains (as it were)? Do you find God beautiful or just useful?** It’s like dating someone because they’re rich not because you love them. You want their stuff, not them.

- A carrot farmer came to the court of a powerful king bringing a giant carrot: “Your majesty, I have harvested this carrot and I knew it was deserving of a king. So I’m bringing it to you to honor you and express my appreciate and devotion to you.” The King was moved by this gesture and gave the farmer 300 acres of land. One of the King’s noblemen saw this and thought, “if he’ll do that for a carrot, then what would he do for a big gift.” That night he went and bought the finest horse he could find, he trots it in the next day and says, “O King, when I saw this horse, I knew it was fit only for a king. As

³ Variant: “Boast” instead of “Burned” (καυχῆσμαι vs. καυθήσομαι). External evidence is conclusive (though leans toward “boast”). Internal logic favors “boast” as it was changed to “burned” after martyrdom became popular (evidenced in the prevalence of patristic sources for “burned”) (Metzger).

your humble servant, I want to give you this horse to honor you.” The King was wise to the situation and said: **“Yesterday, the carrot farmer was giving the carrot to me. Today you are giving the horse to yourself.”**

Sans Love: Without true love from God and for God, even your best actions will be empty, hollowing, and displeasing. All the spirituality in the world without love is meaningless. You might *look* good on the outside but you’ll be spiritually dead on the inside.

- Studies have found that the hearts of lifelong male endurance athletes may contain more plaque or other signs of heart problems, such as scarring and inflammation, than the hearts of less active men of the same age. Running marathons may actually increase your risk of having a heart attack. About 25 percent of the population may be at risk for a condition known as runner’s cardiomyopathy.
- It would be like laboring all day to bake cookies and forgetting the sugar (it’s just crackers). Love is the key ingredient that makes all of our spiritual gifts and religious activity godly.
 - I can preach the greatest sermon, but if I don’t have love, it’s nothing.
 - I can memorize all the scripture I want, but without love, it’s nothing.
 - I can evangelize the whole city, but without love, it’s nothing.
 - I can plant all the churches, but without love, it’s nothing.
- **Love doesn’t replace or get rid of the other commands of Christ or gifts of the Spirit but it governs and directs all of them rightly toward God and each other.**

2. The Beautiful Definition of Love (vv. 4-7)

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

A More Excellent Way: The antithesis to the self-serving, self-absorbed behavior of the Corinthians is the way of love described by Paul. The Corinthians were busy jockeying for better position, all the while tearing down their brothers and sisters in Christ. They were divided and divisive church, quick to offend and easily offended. Rather than a community where “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8).

Love:

- **is Patient:** Despite difficulties and inadequacies, true love lets people grow. It doesn’t expect someone to be perfect. It recognizes we are all works in progress. “People give as much grace as they think they need” (Edmondson). “Long-suffering” (willing to suffer for the good of others).
- **is Kind:** This is behavior that considers the needs of others. Doing something good for someone else. It is also a description of **God**. It’s his kindness that leads us to repentance (Ro 2:4).

- **does not Envy:** (is not jealous) The Corinthians were a jealous church (3:3). They were unhappy when others did well. They wanted what other people had. True love doesn't see the success of someone else as a problem. **Others don't have to fail for you to succeed.** Even when life is going poorly for you, love is happy when life goes well for someone else.
- **does not Boast:** (braggart) Love does not praise oneself. Love doesn't say "look at me." Love is humble, pointing to the grace of God. I don't deserve anything I have, but I'm thankful for all that God has given me.
- **is not Arrogant:** (not puffed up) A loving person is not a "windbag," puffed up on their own accomplishments. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (8:1). Pride is incompatible with love and incompatible with the gospel. "Love is concerned to give itself, not assert itself."
- **is not Rude:** (does not behave shamefully) This is not simply impoliteness, it's morally dishonorable behavior, sin that brings shame (cf. Ro 1:27). The kind of people who "glory in their shame" (Phil 3:19). It is incompatible with true love to call anything that God calls "sin" good and loving.
- **does not Insist on Its Own Way:** (is not self-seeking). Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor... just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved (1 Cor 10:24, 33). Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Phil 2:3-4).
 - We tend to "love" only when we get something out of it. We love someone as long as they make us happy. When we're no longer happy, we no longer love them *because we didn't love them, we loved ourselves.* In church: "If everything has to be done according to my preferences, then I am not worshipping God, I'm worshipping myself" (Hybels *adapted*).
 - The *real test of love* is how someone responds when they don't get their way. How do they treat someone who has nothing to offer them.
 - "Jesus practices love that seeks nothing for itself, but only the good of the loved one" (Stott). Everything about the Corinthians behavior contradicted the character of gospel love. Jesus loves the utterly unworthy. Gospel love is based on the nature of God who is love, not the attractiveness of the beloved.
 - When we insist on our own way, we are showing exactly who we love: ourselves.
 - Children are a beautiful blessing but there's no doubt that their innocence is marred by sin. They are naturally selfish. Feed *me*, change *me*, entertain *me*. That's why a vacation with kids isn't a vacation, it's a trip (the vacation is the time between closing the door and walking around the car). Paul is calling us to grow up in our behavior. We are called to have childlike faith, not childish behavior.
- **Is not Irritable:** (not easily angered or irritable) Have you ever met an irritable person (I don't just mean "resting irritable face"). True love is not easily offended. There is a place for righteous anger, but we diminish righteous anger when we are angry about every little thing.

- Do you know what a gift it is to respond in grace to your brothers and sisters in Christ? To hear their words and interpret their actions with charity rather than suspicion. Assume the best and not the worst (e.g., mad I didn't talk to someone at church).
- **Is not Resentful:** (keeps no record of wrongs) "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor 5:19). God doesn't take our sins and write them down, he cancels the "record of debt" and "[nails] it to the cross" (Col 2:14). "Dead to me" mentality (mental list of their mistakes; hold a grudge).
- **Takes Joy in the Right Things:** Notice this poetic contrast. Love rightly directed does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love does not find joy in injustice but in truth. Love is not indiscriminate acceptance of anything but an embrace of God's path.
 - Love does not rejoice when bad things happen (even to those you don't like). Love does not find joy in wickedness. Love is not content to lie to people to make them happy.
- **Persevering Love:** ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. If I'm honest, these four phrases have been the most prominent to me this week.
 - Love bears, puts up with the brokenness of the world and doesn't give in. Love bears the brunt of the brokenness of the world for the good of others. It shoulders the load. It sacrifices so others can live. It protects.
 - Love believes the promises of God, even when the suffering of the world clouds its vision. Love believes in others when no one else does. There have been some tough times in life and ministry, and I've had some people who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.
 - Love anchors its hope in the assurance of God's plan. It is easy to give up hope. To consign people to failure. But love continues to look toward the future. Everyone can change. Everything can change. This isn't naive optimism but God-directed hope (family member not too far gone).
 - Loved endures through difficulty. Love doesn't give up. "Grief is love persevering" (Vision). I am in a situation that often leaves me feeling hopeless. Maybe you are too. Maybe you feel hopeless, helpless, and discouraged. "When love has no evidence, it believes the best. When the evidence is adverse, it hopes for the best. And when hopes are repeatedly disappointed, it courageously waits" (Robertson and Plummer). Thursday morning, I found myself crying and praying these exact words as I struggled to trust God in a tough situation (*personal situation).
- **Love gives itself away.** Robertson McQuilkin was president of a fast-growing Christian college and seminary for more than two decades. He was married to his wife Muriel for 55 years. A problem arose because he had the career of his dreams but his wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. As the disease progressed it became apparent that Robertson was the only one who could calm her fears and care for her. When he was away from her, she became distressed, and would often walk the half-mile to his office several times a day to look for him ("almost happy with me, almost never happy when

not with me"). So, in 1990, he knew that he had to choose his job or his wife. He says it was an easy choice. In a letter, he wrote, "She has cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years, if I cared for her for the next 40 I would not be out of her debt. (In sickness and in health, 'til death do us part, and I'm a man of my word). Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more: I love Muriel. She is a delight to me. I don't *have* to care for her. I get to! It's my honor." So this college president became a homemaker and caregiver and described his new roll as the best of his life.

3. The Necessary Priority of Love (vv. 8-13)

⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ 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. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Failing Love: ⁸ Love never ends. Sometimes translated as "fails." It never breaks down (e.g., Nissan Sentra, Li'l Red, can't last forever). Only God's love can bear the weight of our hopes and dreams without collapsing. What are you putting your hope in? "I lived in misery, like every man whose soul is tethered by the love of things that cannot last and then is agonized to lose them" (Augustine).

Provisional Gifts: As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. These gifts (tongues, knowledge, prophesy) will eventually pass away. These gifts are **temporary**.

- We need them because there is a great gap between us and God. Even the smartest person barely scratches the surface of God's knowledge.

Temporary: These gifts fill in what we lack until we are face to face with Jesus. Like a child who is dependent on her parents to tell her what she doesn't know and understand, we are dependent on God to give us what we lack.

- We live in humility and dependence on him. We don't find God, he finds us. We don't unveil God, he reveals himself to us. So now we see in a mirror dimly, we know in part. Mirrors at this time in history were polished metal (not always the clearest reflection). It was better than nothing, but no one pretended that it was perfect.
 - We have to have **humility**. If we knew everything, we'd be God! God never misspoke, but we sometimes mishear. We *know* him because he's *revealed* himself to us.
 - Our knowledge in this world is fully in the realm of **trust**, not **achievement**.

Perfect: But there will be a day when sin is no more, when we are face to face with Jesus. When our minds won't be clouded by sin, our fellowship will not be hindered by distance, and

our vision won't be obscured by pride. **There will be a day** when our faith will be sight, when our hopes will be realized and we will *be forever and always in the love of Christ*.

Conclusion:

Love Like This: And who loves like this? Only Jesus. Only he is perfectly patient, and kind, keeping no record of wrongs, living for the good of others and not himself. This quality of love is seen fully and finally on the cross.

- If you or I are ever to love like 1 Cor 13 then we must recognize that we can't do it on our own. We can only only "love because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). The secret to this love is Christ in you (Col 1:27).
- When we find in Jesus what we need and let him give us what we lack *then* we can reflect that grace to others. "It is astonishing how much ministry you are freed up to do when your heart starts getting its sense of glory and worth from Jesus and not all of the other equally insecure people you meet every day" (Rishmawy). "A love you cannot earn is a love you cannot lose" (Matt McCullough), and that love is only found in Jesus.
 - Only Jesus can heal the hurt part of you so you can love others.
 - Only Jesus can heal the lonely part of you so you can love others.
 - Only Jesus can heal the jealous part of you so you can love others.
- All of us lack this kind of love but it is still our call. We cannot excuse ourselves from the duty to show with our lives what the love of Jesus means to us. It's not just a fairy tale but a miracle that the resurrected Christ can do in our lives.

Gospel: This kind of love cannot happen apart from the gospel. Until you are made new in Christ, you will never love like Christ. And to grow in that love, you must continually fix your eyes on him. We were planted in the soil of the gospel, it is there where this love will grow and flourish in our lives. Have you surrendered to your loving Savior?

Community: This is the call for our church, to be a place where the love of Christ is on full display. We can't do this perfectly, but pursue this truly. The difficulty of the task is no excuse to lessen the standard of love to which we are called. We are called by the love of God to love God and others.

Mission: This is the greatest gift we can give each other and the watching world around us. "The greatest thing we can do is help somebody know they are loved and capable of loving" (Mr. Rogers, Presbyterian minister and cardigan connoisseur). Will you give the gift of Christ's love?

<p>4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends.</p>	<p>4 Ἡ ἀγάπη μακροθυμεῖ, χρηστεύεται ἡ ἀγάπη, οὐ ζηλοῖ, [ἡ ἀγάπη] οὐ περπερεύεται, οὐ φυσιοῦται, 5 οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖ, οὐ ζητεῖ τὰ ἑαυτῆς, οὐ παροξύνεται, οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν, 6 οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· 7 πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει. 8 Ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε πίπτει·</p>	<p>Love is patient, love is kind; love does not brag; it does not puff itself up; it does not behave shamefully. It is not self-seeking, it is not easily provoked, it does not keep a record of wrongs. It does not rejoice in injustice but rejoices in truth. It endures all things, believes all things, hopes all things, perseveres all things. Love never runs out.</p>
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