

## “The Greatest of These is Love”

### The Twenty-Fifth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

*Texts: 1 Corinthians: 13:1-13; Leviticus 19:1-18*

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What the Bible says about love, and the way most Americans think about love, are often two different things. Our culture thinks of love as essentially an emotional feeling, most often associated with romance. Pop culture images of the hearts and cupids of Valentine’s Day are ingrained in us from an early age. For those of us who grew up in the sixties and seventies, love is tied to a utopian dream when people experience a powerful sense of brotherhood and unity. Sadly, these images are far from the biblical meaning of love—an emotion which issues forth in action, and which arises not from romantic or sentimental images, but from the Good News that the blood of Jesus, shed on a Roman cross, redeems sinners—people like us who are anything but worthy of the love God showers upon us in Christ’s work of redemption.

We have now come to chapter 13 in our series in 1 Corinthians, one of the most familiar passages in all the Bible. As one writer states about this chapter, “this is one of the most beloved passages in the New Testament, and for good reason. It is one of Paul’s finest moments: indeed, let the interpreter beware lest too much analysis detract from its sheer beauty and power.”<sup>1</sup> Well said, and very true. This is a beloved passage for a reason. It is both beautiful and powerful.

Throughout our study of 1 Corinthians, we have seen that the church in Corinth was plagued by division and factions. This church was composed of new Christians, who were struggling to leave their pagan ways of thinking and doing behind. When they asked Paul about the role and purpose of speaking in tongues—something which apparently was a source of on-going division within the church—Paul answers their question in chapters 12-14. In the opening verses of chapter 12, Paul makes an important distinction between spiritual things (*pneumatikon*), and spiritual gifts (*charismata*), of which tongue-speaking was the least. According to Paul, you cannot properly understand spiritual gifts unless you first understand spiritual things. And you cannot understand spiritual things unless you confess that Jesus is Lord—Jesus is the only Savior from sin, the creator of all things, and whose death upon the cross takes away the wrath of God toward sinners. The cross is the picture of that love of which Paul now speaks.

To make his case that all Christians are members of the spiritual body of Christ (the church) and are given gifts of the Spirit for the common good, Paul uses the metaphor of the human body. Each one of us is a member of Christ’s body (the church) through faith in Jesus. Although not all members of Christ’s body serve the same function (just as eyes are not toes), each member of that body is essential to the health and well-being of the whole. This is why Paul ties various gifts of the Spirit to the offices of the church, before exhorting Christians to earnestly desire the higher gifts, so that the Corinthians will be stronger and better able to resist the temptations of their pagan past, as well as the sinful tendency to put our own interests ahead of others. At the end of chapter twelve Paul had written, “*but earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.*”

That more excellent way is the way of love.

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<sup>1</sup> Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 626.

While some have argued that chapter 13 is a digression from Paul's answer to the Corinthian's question,<sup>2</sup> this is not the case. Throughout Paul's letters, whenever the Apostle addresses the subject of gifts of the Spirit, he connects spiritual gifts to love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Galatians 5:22 comes to mind, because in that passage Paul lists love as the first of the fruit of the Spirit. It also helps to know that the word for love (*agape*) was not widely used before the New Testament era, yet the word *agape* is used 116 times in the New Testament. Paul uses the term 75 times, making *agape* the characteristic Pauline and Christian word for love.<sup>3</sup>

The problem we face is that *agape* has a much different meaning in the New Testament than our American pop culture assigns to the word "love." According to Leon Morris:

Christians thought of love as that quality we see on the cross. It is a love for the utterly unworthy, a love that proceeds from a God who is love. It is a love lavished on others without a thought whether they are worthy or not. It proceeds from the nature of the lover, not from any attractiveness in the beloved. The Christian who has experienced God's love for him while he was yet a sinner (Romans 5:8) has been transformed by the experience. Now he sees people as those for whom Christ died, the objects of God's love and therefore the objects of the love of God's people. In his measure he comes to practice the love that seeks nothing for itself, but only the good of the loved one. It is this love that the apostle unfolds.<sup>4</sup>

Christ's love for sinners is the perfect picture of the love that believers are to have for each other. It is that which God requires of us in terms of loving our neighbor as required by God in his law—such as we read in our Old Testament lesson from Leviticus 19. But to truly understand the meaning of *agape*, we are to look to the cross, as directed by Paul (Romans 5:8—"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us") and John (1 John 4:10—"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"). In this case, *agape* refers to God's love for sinners, which in turn, Christians are to demonstrate toward each other. *Agape* is not to be confused with *eros* (romantic love) or *philia* (brotherly love). *Agape* is the holy God's love for sinners like us, who can do nothing to earn God's love, and who are unworthy of the love we receive.

There is a long history of Christians using these verses out of context (because of their obvious beauty), sadly ignoring the obvious link Paul has drawn between the gifts of the Spirit, and love for our brothers and sisters earlier in this epistle. Although we often hear these verses read at Christian weddings, this is to confuse *agape* with *eros* (romantic love). In this case, Paul is not talking about sentimental feelings or romance. Paul is talking about that love we are to have for each other because such love is not only the fruit of the Holy Spirit, but such love must govern all use of gifts of the Holy Spirit, including the gift of tongues.<sup>5</sup> Gifts of the Spirit are given to build up Christ's body, not enhance the status of certain individuals. Paul does not want people to stop using the gifts of the Holy Spirit, nor does he wish to depreciate their importance. But he does want a church divided by factions to be re-unified through a

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<sup>2</sup> See the helpful discussion in: Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 626-628.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 177.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 177.

<sup>5</sup> Hays, First Corinthians, 221.

proper use and understanding of these gifts, since love for the fellow members of Christ's spiritual body (the church) is the ultimate purpose of the gifts of the Spirit.

Beginning in verse 1, Paul makes his point using three conditional sentences ("if"), which should have a sobering effect upon the Corinthians, because Paul begins with the most divisive issue associated with spiritual gifts, i.e., the speaking in tongues.<sup>6</sup> *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."* While the phrase, "tongues of men and angels" may be a reference to the gift of tongues, the expression is broad enough to refer to speech in general, i.e., "the eloquence of men or of angels."<sup>7</sup>

Pentecostals contend that Paul's reference to "tongues of angels" is proof that the gift of tongues entails some kind of a heavenly language (tongues of angels), but I don't think that is Paul's point. According to Acts 2:6 ff, people heard the gospel proclaimed in their own language (Greek) on the Day of Pentecost. Greek was spoken in all of the regions listed. Despite the fact that there are diverse ethnic groups present in Jerusalem on Pentecost (each with their own local dialects) Peter's Acts 2 sermon is not interpreted—which means he preached in Greek, the common language of the time.<sup>8</sup> In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's point is not that tongue-speakers speak the language of angels (i.e., a "heavenly language)," but that no spoken language of men or angels can eliminate the necessity of love for the brethren.<sup>9</sup>

The Corinthians were used to being mesmerized by eloquent speech with flowery words. The Corinthians were unhappy with Paul because, apparently, the Apostle was not a very captivating speaker. And yet, people who are eloquent in speech (perhaps some of those who were causing schism in the church) but who do not practice love, are nothing but noise-makers. Paul compares them (and himself, if he too does not practice love) to a noisy gong (literally "bronze vases" used for amplification in large buildings), or a loud cymbal. For Paul, eloquent speech without love is nothing but noise.

There is also every likelihood that there is a cultural reference here which goes beyond the making of noise. Although the Jews used cymbals in worship, cymbals and gongs may have been part of temple worship practiced by Greek pagans, especially among the followers of Dionysus and Cybele.<sup>10</sup> Paul may be saying something like "words without action are as useless as the stuff that goes on at the local pagan temple." The gifts of the Spirit (including tongues) are given by God for service in the church which is supposed to manifest itself in concrete acts of love for fellow Christians. Seeing gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, apart from the biblical connection to love for our brothers and sisters, completely distorts any spiritual gift's true purpose.

In verse 2, Paul continues this same line of thinking. *"And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all*

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<sup>6</sup> Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 629.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 177.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Zerhusen, "A New look at Tongues: A Linguistic Approach to Understanding Other Tongues in Acts 2," posted on the web-page of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals.

<sup>9</sup> Contra Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 630.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 178. Cf. Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary, 479.

*mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*” Continuing to correct non-Christian ways of thinking and doing, widely-held and practiced by the Corinthians, Paul now aims at another Corinthian sacred cow, knowledge. Before mentioning knowledge, Paul first speaks of prophecy (preaching). Recall that in 1 Corinthians 12:10, Paul has mentioned that prophecy is ranked just below the office of apostle. Paul regards prophecy (preaching) very highly. If prophecy is not uttered in love, it too amounts to nothing.

The same is true for understanding mysteries (Spirit-given insight into the things of Christ) apart from love. It amounts to nothing. The same holds true for knowledge. If a Christian has great faith but has not love, they are nothing. Even the possession of the higher gifts just mentioned by Paul, does not amount to anything in terms of personal status, if the person who possesses these gifts does not manifest love for the other members of Christ’s body. Without love for our brothers and sisters, we are nothing, no matter how many gifts of the Spirit we have been given.

Once again, Paul has turned the non-Christian conception of these things on its head. The purpose of spiritual gifts is not for the benefit, enjoyment or status of the one who is given them. Gifts of the Spirit are given to us so that we might truly love one another and truly serve one another in love. Love is the prime fruit of the Spirit, and the presence of love among believers in the church is the proof that the gifts of the Spirit are operative in the church. If the gifts of the Spirit are being used properly, believers will love one another, just as various parts of the body work together as one. Paul even goes on to say *“If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”* Even the person who sells all that he has and gives it to the poor, but does not do it out of love, gains nothing. That person who voluntarily sacrifices themselves in a spectacular fashion, but lacks love, gains nothing.

For Paul, then, the gifts of the Spirit, cannot be properly understood apart from their ultimate purpose. This, I think, gives us good reason to argue that the primary purpose of the gifts of the Spirit (from the greater gifts to the least) is to equip the members of the body of Christ (the church) so that we love one another. But all of this begs the question. What are the characteristics of the kind of love of which Paul has been speaking? These characteristics are now enumerated in verses 4-7 in those familiar words that require little comment. *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”*

The word for patience is the opposite of being short-tempered. It is directed to people, not circumstances. The next word (“kind”) is used only one time in the entire New Testament (here). The word reinforces the idea that the work of the Spirit is to enable us to serve one another, since love is kind, or good, in response to those who treat us improperly.<sup>11</sup> The love of which Paul speaks is not displeased with the success of others. Love is not a wind-bag (the literal meaning of the word translated as “boasting”), nor is love proud, seeking to exalt oneself at the expense of others. Love keeps the needs and well-being of others firmly in mind. The word translated “rude” is taken from a word which means “proper form” (schema). Love does not act out of form, that is, contrary to its self-effacing nature.

Love does not seek its own way (self-seeking). Love is not easily angered. This is a reference to a self-righteous and sinful response to our neighbors, since anger is not necessarily a sin—in Ephesians 4:26 Paul writes “be angry and do not sin.” As Karl Barth once put it, “my neighbor can get dreadfully on my

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 180.

nerves even in what he regards as, and what may well be, his particular gifts....Love cannot alter the fact that he gets on my nerves, but . . . it can rule out . . . my allowing myself to be 'provoked' by him."<sup>12</sup> Love does not keep a list of wrongs which are eventually to be "righted." Love does not delight in the sins and misfortunes of others—one place where our bent toward sin almost inevitably surfaces. Love rejoices in the truth. And love speaks the truth, even when the truth hurts.

In verse 7, Paul lists some of the positive aspects of love—what love is, as opposed to what it is not. Love *always* bears, believes, hopes, endures. Love does not easily give up and that circumstances do not allow it to change.<sup>13</sup> Love protects (literally "covers"), in the sense keeping things safe from public scrutiny. Love trusts although it is not gullible. Love gives the benefit of doubt. Love hopes—it is eschatological in the sense that it is forward looking, viewing things from God's eternal perspective, not merely through temporal circumstances. When Paul says that love perseveres, he means that love is steadfast and does not easily give up. Love will remain when everything else is gone.

Throughout this discussion, Paul is continuing his instructions about the true nature of spiritual gifts (to equip us for service and enable us to love one another), so as to place the Corinthian's preoccupation with the gift of tongues into the broader context of love of neighbor. Love has an abiding quality, because it is characteristic of Christians not only in this age, but in the age to come where perfect love is finally manifest, while the *charismata* are manifest only in "this present age," because of their equipping function.<sup>14</sup> It is not that the *charismata* are not important—Paul exhorts us to earnestly desire spiritual gifts precisely because they are so important to our present existence. But spiritual gifts are not permanent. Love is. This becomes clear in verse 8. "*Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.*"

As Paul understands the nature of love, its character abides—it will not fail (in the sense of collapsing). Love will abide both in this age and the age to come, while the *charismata* will not. Paul's point is that at some point (i.e. "when the perfect comes," v. 10), prophecy, tongues and knowledge will then cease. Like this present evil age, the *charismata* will cease when the age to come is fully realized, when Jesus comes back to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new.<sup>15</sup>

In order to correct the misconceptions among the Corinthians, many of whom were enamored by the gifts of the Spirit for all the wrong reasons, it was important for Paul to point out that the very gifts which the Corinthians valued so highly were not of the same character as love. Love will remain, while prophecy, tongues and knowledge will not be needed after Christ comes back. This can be seen in the fact that the "perfect" (v. 10) comes from a Greek word (*teleion*) which refers to the predestined aim or end decreed by God. Paul is referring to the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the age when he speaks of the perfect arriving. In the presence of God, we will not need preaching, the gift of tongues or of

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), IV.2.834 (cited in Morris).

<sup>13</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 182.

<sup>14</sup> Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 641.

<sup>15</sup> Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 643.

knowledge.<sup>16</sup> These things will pass away when this evil age passes away.

The transient nature of the gifts just mentioned becomes clear in verses 9-10. *“For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.”* While often disputed, these verses make much sense in light of the already, not-yet distinction. Simply put, the more we know, the more we realize that we don’t know. Even through the means of divinely-given speech (prophesy) God does not reveal everything, since there are a number of things associated with the not-yet, which are beyond our comprehension. But when we reach the end (when God brings all things to their divinely-appointed goal), then knowledge and prophecy will cease. These things will no longer be needed when we see things from God’s perspective (i.e., “the age to come”), the point of the following verses.

Paul now speaks of maturity—the church must grow up so as to see the purpose of spiritual gifts correctly, and that means seeing the exercise of love as of far more importance to Christian maturity (because it abides) than the gifts of knowledge, prophecy and tongues (which will not). In verses 11-13, Paul uses yet another illustration. *“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. 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. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”*

Children grow up and adults no longer think and act like children (or at least are not supposed to). While this is a process with an indiscernible time frame, the perfect tense points to the fact of a definitive break with our childish past (“when I was”). At some point, we become adults. We stop behaving as children. Paul’s point is that the body of Christ will one day mature to the point where spiritual gifts are no longer needed—the gifts just mentioned will pass away even as our childhoods do. To connect this maturity to the close of the apostolic era is a bit problematic, because Paul connects this to a time when we see face to face—when Christ returns. No doubt, Paul’s comment about childhood is a pointed reminder that it is time for the Corinthians to grow up.

Paul’s reference to seeing things poorly in the present is a reference to the fact that we live in this present evil age, awaiting the coming of the perfect and the age to come. Until Christ returns, at best we see things dimly, as a reflection of what is to come. When the age to come dawns in its fulness when Jesus comes back, we will indeed see face to face. The mirror metaphor makes perfect sense in the already-not yet eschatological categories of Paul. In that day, we will not only know as we ought (the theology of pilgrims becomes the theology of the blessed), but we will be truly known (a knowledge which God has of us even now). Over against those things which pass away (prophecy, tongues and knowledge), some things will remain, faith, hope and love (all fruit of the Spirit). While all these things abide even now, love is the greatest of them all, the most excellent way, and the very characteristic of the age to come.

**W**hat, then, do we say by way of application?

First, Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians to “grow up” and move on to maturity applies to us every bit as much as it did to the Corinthians. The Corinthians were fighting over how to exercise the gift of tongues (ironically, the least of the gifts) during worship and in the process were tearing the church apart. We, as Reformed Christians likewise need to act like adults. In our case, that means things like not belittling others (non-Reformed Christians) through our speech and actions. The primary sin of

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<sup>16</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 182-183.

our tradition is pride—we are right about doctrine, so everyone else must be an idiot. We may be right about doctrine, but we cannot forget Paul's words (also a doctrine), if we have not love for our brothers and sisters we are nothing but windbags and noisy gongs.

Paul's emphasis upon love for our brothers and sisters also reminds us that biblically understood, love is not some vague feeling of unity or brotherhood. We must not confuse *agape* with *eros* or *philia*. *Agape* is not tied to cupid's arrows or Valentine's hearts. Love (*agape*) sees others—equally unworthy as we are—as redeemed by the blood of Christ. Because of this, love acts when we have brothers and sisters in need. Love empathizes with those who weep, mourn and suffer. Love cooks food, provides meals, cleans house, visits the sick, makes phone calls and sends cards of encouragement. Love prays for those in need, gives money to the deacons to help those in crisis, and love places the interests of others above ourselves. Love is a fruit of the Spirit, and love should be the end result of God giving gifts of the Spirit to the church. According to Paul, any discussion of gifts of the Spirit, must lead to the consideration that God gives these gifts to the church to enable us to love one another, even as Christ has loved us.

Finally, the command to love carries with it no ability whatsoever to obey the commandment. There is only one way to love our brothers and sisters as God commands of us. And that is to look to the cross, where Jesus died for all of my sins, including all those times I have failed to love my brothers and sisters in Christ as God has commanded us. Whatever love I show to my neighbor is to mirror that love which God has shown to me in the shed blood and wounds of my crucified Savior. Love for my neighbor begins when I behold the cross of Jesus Christ and consider his death for my sins.

As Paul has made plain in this wonderful chapter, the gifts of the Spirit will cease when the perfect comes and we finally reach maturity. *“Faith, hope, and love abide; but the greatest of these is love.”*