

The Book of 1 Corinthians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: The Way of Love

1 Corinthians 13:1–13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This chapter sets love above all spiritual gifts and, in its closing verses, teaches the temporary nature of the miraculous gifts. What is doctrinally at stake includes the supremacy and permanence of love and the teaching that the miraculous gifts of prophecy, tongues, and partial knowledge would pass away when the perfect came (13:8–10). The teacher should present love as the indispensable heart of the Christian life, the very character of Christ, and should handle the cessation passage clearly. In context, Paul contrasts what is partial with what is perfect, or complete. The miraculous gifts gave God's people knowledge in part, piece by piece, during the church's infancy. When the perfect, the completed revelation now found in the New Testament, came, the partial and piecemeal means passed away, just as a child's understanding gives way to an adult's and a dim reflection gives way to clear sight. This is consistent with the previous lesson: the miraculous sign gifts belonged to the founding age and have ceased, and the church now possesses God's complete and sufficient word (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Present this confidently while keeping love, not controversy, at the center of the lesson.

At the same time, this chapter is intensely formational, perhaps more than any other in the letter. It exposes how empty even impressive religion is without love, paints a portrait of love that is really a portrait of Christ, and calls the student to measure maturity by love rather than by knowledge or gifts.

Aim, then, to form lovers, not merely informed people. Send students home convicted that love is the point, holding up the portrait of verses 4 through 7 as the life Christ is forming in them, and clear-minded about why the miraculous gifts were temporary while love endures forever. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, but do not let it crowd out the chapter's great call to love.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says that without love, speaking in tongues is “a noisy gong,” prophetic powers and all knowledge make him “nothing,” and even giving away all he has gains him “nothing” (13:1–3). Why does Paul insist that love is what gives every gift, act, and sacrifice its true value, and what does this teach about what God is really looking for in us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the context. Paul places this chapter deliberately in the middle of his teaching on gifts. The Corinthians prized the spectacular; Paul shows them that without love it is all worthless.

Walk through the three hypotheticals of 13:1–3. The greatest eloquence becomes mere noise; the greatest knowledge and faith leave a person nothing; the greatest sacrifice gains nothing, all without love. Paul could not state the priority of love more starkly.

Draw out what God values. He is not impressed by gifts, achievements, or even sacrifices in themselves; he looks at the love behind them. Love is the currency of the kingdom.

Apply it. This reorders the whole Christian life. The question is not first how gifted or busy or sacrificial we are, but whether love is the motive and substance of what we do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love as what gives every gift and act its true value (13:1–3)
- The worthlessness of even great gifts and sacrifices without love
- God's concern with the love behind our actions
- Love as the currency of the kingdom
- The reordering of the Christian life around love

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul say the greatest gifts are nothing without love?
- What does this reveal about what God values in us?
- How should this reorder the way we measure the Christian life?

Question 2

Student Question:

It is sobering that we can do impressive and even sacrificial things and still, in God's eyes, be "nothing" without love. Where might you be going through religious or generous motions without love behind them, serving out of duty, guilt, or a desire to be seen? How could love become the real motive?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the sobering verdict of 13:1–3 into the student's own service. We can do good things from poor motives.

Help students name the counterfeit motives: duty without affection, guilt, the desire to be seen, the wish to feel good about ourselves. These can power a great deal of religious activity.

Point toward love as the true motive. The aim is not to stop serving until our motives are perfect, but to let the love of Christ increasingly become the why behind our actions.

Aim for one motive-check. Ask each student to name one area of service and to examine, and ask God to purify, the motive behind it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Doing good things from poor motives
- Counterfeit motives: duty, guilt, the desire to be seen
- Love as the true motive for service
- Letting Christ's love become the why behind our actions

Discussion Prompts

- Where might you be going through the motions without love?
- What lesser motives tend to drive your service?
- How could love become the real motive this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul describes love in action: "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" (13:4-5). What does this portrait teach about the true nature of love, and how is it different from the way our culture usually defines love as mainly a feeling or an attraction?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Walk through the portrait of 13:4-5 phrase by phrase. Love is patient and kind; it does not envy, boast, or act arrogantly or rudely; it does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful. Each phrase is concrete and active.

Stress that love here is action and disposition, not feeling. Paul defines love by what it does and refuses to do, not by emotion or attraction.

Contrast this with the cultural view. Our culture largely treats love as a feeling that happens to us and fades when it stops. Paul's love is a settled commitment expressed in behavior, which is why it can be commanded.

Point to its source. This portrait is the character of Christ and the fruit the Spirit produces in us. We grow in it not by gritting our teeth but by abiding in him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love as action and disposition, not mere feeling (13:4-5)
- Love defined by what it does and refuses to do
- The contrast with the cultural view of love as feeling

- Love as a commitment that can be commanded
- The character of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit as love's source

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul define love, and why is it more than a feeling?
- How does this differ from the way our culture defines love?
- Where does this kind of love come from?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says love “does not insist on its own way” and “is not irritable or resentful” and “keeps no record of wrongs.” Think of a relationship where you tend to insist on your own way, grow irritable, or keep score. What would it look like to love that person the way verses 4 and 5 describe, starting this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes the portrait into a specific relationship. Love is tested most where we insist on our own way, grow irritable, or keep score.

Help students locate the relationship honestly. The portrait of verses 4 and 5 becomes searching when applied to a spouse, a parent, a child, a difficult coworker.

Make the application concrete. Loving this person might mean yielding a preference, holding the tongue, releasing a grievance, or choosing kindness in a recurring moment of friction.

Aim for one specific act of love. Ask each student to name the relationship and one trait of love they will practice there this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Applying the portrait of love to a specific, hard relationship
- Yielding our own way, releasing irritation and grudges
- Concrete acts over abstract intentions
- Practicing love where it is most tested

Discussion Prompts

- In which relationship do you most insist on your own way or keep score?
- Which trait from verses 4 and 5 is hardest there?
- What is one specific act of love you can offer this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul writes that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” and then declares, “Love never ends” (13:7–8). What does this teach about the durability of real love, and how does this kind of love reflect the way God in Christ has loved us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open up 13:7. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. This is not naivety but a love that keeps covering, trusting, hoping, and persevering rather than giving up.

Then highlight 13:8: love never ends. Unlike the temporary gifts, love is permanent, woven into the eternal nature of God himself.

Connect this to God’s love for us. This is exactly how God in Christ has loved us, bearing with our failures, enduring the cross, never giving up on his people. Our love is meant to echo his.

Apply it. Real love is durable. It does not evaporate when the feeling fades or the relationship gets hard, because it is rooted in commitment and in God’s own character.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love that bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things (13:7)
- The permanence of love, which never ends (13:8)
- God’s enduring love in Christ as the pattern
- Love rooted in commitment and in God’s character
- Durable love versus love dependent on feeling

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that love bears and endures all things?
- How does this love reflect the way God has loved us?
- Why is love able to last when feelings fade?

Question 6**Student Question:**

Real love keeps showing up, bearing and enduring, even when it is hard and unreturned. Is there a relationship where your love has grown tired, cynical, or ready to quit? How might the promise that love “bears all things” and “endures all things” call you back to faithful love there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes enduring love into a relationship where the student’s love has grown tired. Most of us have one.

Help students name it without despair, a relationship where love has become cynical, weary, or ready to quit.

Apply 13:7 gently. The call to bear and endure is not a command to accept abuse or to pretend, but an invitation to a faithful, persevering love that keeps showing up and keeps hoping.

Aim for one renewed step. Ask each student to name one way they could return to faithful love in that relationship this week, leaning on God for the strength to do it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Renewing love that has grown tired or cynical
- Faithful, persevering love that keeps showing up
- Enduring love distinguished from accepting harm
- Leaning on God for strength to love

Discussion Prompts

- Where has your love grown tired or ready to quit?
- How does the promise that love endures call you back?
- What is one step of faithful love you can take there this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul concludes, "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (13:13). Why does Paul call love the greatest, even greater than faith and hope, and what does it mean that love is the one thing that will continue on when faith has become sight and hope has been fulfilled?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open up 13:13. Faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest is love. All three are essential and enduring marks of the Christian, yet love is supreme.

Explain why love is greatest. Faith will one day become sight, and hope will be fulfilled when we receive what we hoped for, but love will never become obsolete. In the presence of God, faith and hope reach their goal, while love goes on forever.

Connect love to the nature of God. God is love. To love is to share in his very character and to do, even now, what we will be doing for all eternity.

Apply it. If love is the greatest and the most enduring, then growing in love is the most important growth there is, more than knowledge, more than gifts, more even than the exercise of faith and hope.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith, hope, and love as the enduring marks of the Christian (13:13)
- Love as the greatest because it never becomes obsolete
- Faith becoming sight and hope being fulfilled, while love goes on
- Love as a sharing in the very character of God
- Growth in love as the most important growth of all

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul call love greater than faith and hope?
- What does it mean that love alone continues when faith becomes sight?
- How does loving connect us to the character of God?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul presents growth in love as the true mark of spiritual maturity, more than knowledge or gifts. If you measured your own maturity not by how much you know but by how well you love, where would you stand? What is one specific way you sense God calling you to grow up into love?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes Paul's standard of maturity, love, into the student's self-assessment. We tend to measure maturity by knowledge or experience; Paul measures it by love.

Invite honest reflection. If our maturity were gauged by how well we love rather than how much we know, where would we land? The question is humbling for all of us.

Point to the path of growth. We grow in love by abiding in Christ, receiving his love, and deliberately practicing it, especially where it is hard.

Aim for one growth step. Ask each student to name one specific way God is calling them to grow up into love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love as the true measure of spiritual maturity
- The contrast between knowing much and loving well
- Growing in love by abiding in Christ
- Deliberate practice of love where it is hard

Discussion Prompts

- If maturity were measured by love, where would you stand?

- Why is love a truer measure than knowledge?
- What is one way God is calling you to grow up into love?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul writes that “as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away,” because “we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away” (13:8–10), illustrating it with a child growing up and a dim mirror giving way to clear sight. What does Paul teach here about why the miraculous gifts of the early church were temporary, what “the perfect” is that brought the partial to an end, and how does this fit with the truth that the church now has God’s complete and sufficient revelation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson; handle it clearly while keeping love at the center. Paul says prophecies will pass away, tongues will cease, and knowledge will pass away, because these were partial: “we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away” (13:8–10).

Identify the key contrast: the partial versus the perfect (the complete). The miraculous gifts gave God’s people revelation in part, piece by piece, during the early days of the church. They were never meant to be permanent; they were the means by which God delivered his word before it was complete.

Explain what the perfect, or complete, is. In context it is the completed revelation of God, now found in the finished New Testament. When God’s revelation was complete, the piecemeal means of delivering it, prophecy, tongues, and partial knowledge, had served their purpose and passed away. The church no longer needed the partial because it now had the whole.

Open up Paul’s two illustrations. The child who thinks and speaks as a child gives way to the adult who puts childish things aside (13:11); the church’s infancy with its partial gifts gave way to maturity with the complete word. The dim, indirect reflection in an ancient mirror gives way to clear sight (13:12); the partial knowledge of those early days gave way to the full, clear knowledge God has now given in his completed word. Note that this maturity language fits the move from the church’s infancy to its fullness, when the revelation was complete.

Tie it to the previous lesson and to the church’s settled conviction. The miraculous sign gifts belonged to the founding age and have ceased; God’s revelation is complete and sufficient, able to make the man of God complete and equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). We do not look for new revelation or modern sign gifts. Present this confidently and kindly, so students are settled rather than anxious about competing claims.

Return to the chapter's point. Paul's whole reason for raising this is to show that the gifts the Corinthians prized were temporary, while love abides forever. Even this doctrinal discussion serves the call to love. End by lifting the eyes back to love, which never ends.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temporary, partial nature of prophecy, tongues, and piecemeal knowledge (13:8–9)
- The contrast of the partial with the perfect, or complete (13:10)
- The perfect understood as the completed revelation now found in the New Testament
- The illustrations of child to adult and dim mirror to clear sight as the move to maturity (13:11–12)
- The cessation of the miraculous sign gifts and the sufficiency of God's completed word (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- No present-day new revelation or sign gifts, presented confidently and kindly
- The whole point serving the supremacy of love, which never ends

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul say the miraculous gifts were partial and temporary?
- What is the perfect that brought the partial to an end, and how do the illustrations help explain it?
- How does this fit with the truth that the church now has God's complete and sufficient word?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter. Paul shows that love outweighs every gift, paints love's portrait, and promises that love alone never ends. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from 1 Corinthians 13 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks students to gather the chapter and name one way Christ is forming them. Let them speak first.

If needed, recall the movements: love as the indispensable thing, the portrait of love, the permanence of love, and the temporary nature of the gifts.

Bring it back to the heart. The lasting question of this chapter is not how gifted am I, but how loving am I. Let that question rest gently on each student.

Push toward the specific and close in prayer that students would grow in the love that never ends, becoming more like Christ this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation through growth in love
- Measuring life by love rather than gifts or knowledge
- The love that never ends as the goal
- Moving from general agreement to a specific, named response

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this chapter pressed on you most, and why?
- What is the one truth from 1 Corinthians 13 you most need this week?
- What named step is God asking you to take in response?