

The Book of 1 Corinthians

Lesson 11: The Way of Love -- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

It is the most beloved chapter in the letter, read at weddings, stitched onto pillows, printed on coffee mugs. And that is a little ironic, because Paul did not write it for a wedding. He wrote it to a quarreling, competitive, self-impressed church that was using its spiritual gifts as weapons and trophies. Right in the middle of his teaching on gifts, Paul stops, takes a breath, and shows them something better. He calls it “a still more excellent way.” He means love.

And he begins by emptying out everything the Corinthians were so proud of. Speak in the tongues of men and angels? Without love, it is just noise, a clanging gong. Have prophetic powers, understand all mysteries and all knowledge, have faith to move mountains? Without love, Paul says, “I am nothing.” Give away everything you own, even hand over your body to be burned? Without love, you gain nothing. He could not be more blunt. The most spectacular gifts and the most heroic sacrifices, performed without love, add up to zero. Love is not one virtue among many. It is the thing that gives everything else its worth.

Then Paul paints love’s portrait, and it is not a soft, sentimental thing. It is patient and kind. It does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, is not irritable, keeps no record of wrongs. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Read that list slowly, and you realize Paul is not describing a feeling at all. He is describing the way Jesus actually treated people. Put the name of Christ in place of the word love, and every line rings true. This is a portrait of our Lord, and the life he is forming in us.

Finally Paul lifts our eyes to the future. The gifts the Corinthians prized so highly, prophecy, tongues, the piecemeal knowledge of those early days, were temporary by design. They served their purpose and then passed away when God’s revelation was complete, the way a child’s understanding gives way to an adult’s. But love never ends. Faith, hope, and love abide, and the greatest of these is love. Read this chapter and let it search you. Not “how gifted am I,” but “how loving am I?” That is the question that will still matter when everything else has passed away.

Group Discussion: Paul says that without love, even the most impressive spiritual gifts and the most heroic sacrifices amount to nothing (13:1-3). Why do you think it is so possible to do religious, even good and generous, things without love, and what does it say about God that he values the love behind our actions so much more than the actions themselves?

Personal Reflection: Read slowly through Paul’s description of love in verses 4 through 7, patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not irritable, keeping no record of wrongs. Which one of these is hardest for you, and in which relationship? What would it look like to let Christ grow that particular trait in you this week?

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 13:34–35, the new commandment to love as Christ loved; 1 John 4:7–21, God is love and we love because he first loved us; Romans 5:6–8, God showing his love for us while we were still sinners; Galatians 5:22–23, love as the first fruit of the Spirit; 2 Timothy 3:16–17, the Scriptures making the man of God complete and equipped for every good work