

Challenges Christians Face

Love – Part 1

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

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Love – Part 1

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of spiritual gifts. Let's learn about more about that in a message I am calling, "Love."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13:

³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

^{13:1} 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, 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. (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13)

Introduction

About a year after living in this country as a foreign student, a fellow student took me on a trip from Chicago to Philadelphia. He did all the driving and I was the navigator. He gave me a map and told me to guide him from Chicago to Philadelphia. Things went reasonably well on the interstate. However, as soon as we got to the outskirts of Philadelphia, I had a very difficult time navigating because I was unfamiliar with the map and the roads.

Years later after I had become familiar with this country and also with maps, I had a much better time navigating from one place to another. Now, when planning a trip, I study the map and decide which route is the best one to take, and then follow it.

In today's chapter, the apostle Paul continued to talk about spiritual gifts. He had, as it were, invited the Corinthians to look at a map. They were traveling with little understanding about where they were going. Paul called them to examine their situation in order to find the best way to exercise their spiritual gifts.

Paul was in fact in the middle of a discussion about spiritual gifts. Chapters 12 – 14 are a discussion about spiritual gifts. Even though chapter 13 is often called “the love chapter,” it is not in fact a description of marital love. Instead, it is description of spiritual gifts that are motivated by love.

The Corinthians were interested in personal fulfillment and prestige. They were not interested in building up their brothers and sisters in Christ. In this chapter, Paul gave them a new orientation toward life that focused on putting other people first. He taught them to love, knowing that if they loved one another rightly, they would use their spiritual gifts properly.

If there is any similarity between ancient Corinth and our modern-day church, it lies in our failure to love one another well. In fact, by many accounts we are often worse than the Corinthians. They had at least managed to stay united, in spite of the many abuses that were taking place in their fellowship. Today, most Christians are so self-centered that if we don't get our way, we

simply go to the church down the street. We do not place others first, and we certainly do not commit ourselves to loving others in the way that Paul teaches.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, we learn that Christian love is the most important of all the gifts from God. We are called to pursue love, without which all of our spiritual gifts amount to nothing.

Let's learn about this as follows:

1. The Preeminence of Love (12:31)
2. The Necessity of Love (13:1-3)
3. The Characteristics of Love (13:4-7)
4. The Permanence of Love (13:8-12)
5. The Superiority of Love (13:13)

I. The Preeminence of Love (12:31)

First, notice the preeminence of love.

Paul introduced chapter 13 with the last verse in chapter 12. He said in 1 Corinthians 12:31: **“But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”**

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to **earnestly desire the higher gifts**. He acknowledged that some gifts were more visible than others. He also recognized that the Corinthians were abusing spiritual gifts by being enamored with some of them and looking down at Christians who did not possess them.

Paul was about to show the Corinthians **a still more excellent way** to live as a Christian in the body of Christ.

It would be difficult to overemphasize Paul's commitment to love among Christians. Love was to guide believers in the way in which they worship God. Love was to guide husbands and wives in their relationship to each other. Love was to guide Christians in the way they participate in the Lord's Supper. Love was to guide believers in restricting their freedom for the sake of others.

For Paul, love was the greatest of all gifts.

II. The Necessity of Love (13:1-3)

Second, let's look at the necessity of love.

As we move into chapter 13, it is important to note again that Paul was talking about the way in which Christians exercise their spiritual gifts. Chapter 13 is not about sentimental love. It is about the necessity of love in the exercise of our spiritual gifts.

Verses 1-3 contain several conditional statements. A conditional statement has two parts, known as the *protasis* and the *apodosis*. The *protasis* contains the “if” part of the statement, and the *apodosis* contains the “then” part of the statement (although “then” is not always stated). So, for example, a conditional statement is, “If the weather is good (that's the *protasis*), then we will go to the beach (that's the *apodosis*).”

In the conditional statements in verses 1-3 there is also a qualifying clause added to the *protasis*, which is: **but have not love**. Paul set out six conditional statements, and they each follow the same basic structure: “If I have this particular gift, but have not love, then I am nothing.” In essence, Paul said that a particular gift is useless without love. Let's see how he put it.

A. *The Gift of Tongues Is Useless Without Love (13:1)*

First, the gift of tongues is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 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.”**

Tongues topped the list because of the overemphasis that the Corinthians put on the gift of tongues. He not only talked about **the tongues of men** but also **of angels**. There is no evidence anywhere in the Scripture that Paul or anyone else was able to speak an angelic language. Paul's point is simply that even if he had such an extraordinary gift—of being able to **speak in the tongues. . . of**

angels—but did not have **love**, then he would simply be **a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal**.

Love is absolutely necessary for the proper functioning of a spiritual gift.

B. The Gift of Prophecy Is Useless Without Love (13:2a)

Second, the gift of prophecy is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 2a: **“And if I have prophetic powers, . . . but have not love, I am nothing.”**

Paul did have **prophetic powers** (cf. Acts 13:1-2). But without love, it is useless.

C. The Gift of Knowledge Is Useless Without Love (13:2b)

Third, the gift of knowledge is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 2b: **“And if I . . . understand all mysteries and all knowledge, . . . but have not love, I am nothing.”**

We would greatly esteem a person who **could understand all mysteries and** who had **all knowledge**. Can you imagine how sought after such a person would be? But, again, without love, such knowledge is useless.

D. The Gift of Faith Is Useless Without Love (13:2c)

Fourth, the gift of faith is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 2c: **“And if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”**

Paul was not talking about saving faith here. Every Christian possesses faith in Jesus Christ. But the spiritual gift of **faith** is that faith that enables a person to trust God to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Nevertheless, should a person who had such great **faith, so as to remove even mountains**, but not have love, it would be useless.

E. The Gift of Giving Is Useless Without Love (13:3a)

Fifth, the gift of giving is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 3a: **“If I give away all I have, . . . but have not love, I gain nothing.”**

Surely a person who gives away everything must have love? Not necessarily, according to Paul. The difference between a person who gives away everything who does not love and one who does love is this: a person who does not love gives away everything because of how it makes him feel, whereas a person who does love gives away everything because of how it benefits others.

Love is other-person centered, as we shall see in a moment.

F. The Gift of Martyrdom Is Useless Without Love (13:3b)

And sixth, the gift of martyrdom is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 3b: **“And if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”**

Even becoming a martyr is useless without love.

All six of these conditional situations suggest an incredible gift or act. Nevertheless, Paul responded that each one was absolutely useless without love.

Paul followed Jesus, who placed “love your neighbor as yourself” second only to “love the Lord your God” (Matthew 22:37-40). The command to love one another is the second most important command in the entire Bible. It is no wonder Paul argued that all spiritual gifts are useless without love for others.

III. The Characteristics of Love (13:4-7)

Third, let’s now look at the characteristics of love.

Paul realized that the Corinthians needed to understand what love was. So, he described the characteristics of love.

He gave fifteen characteristics of love in verses 4-7. And do you know what is fascinating about these characteristics? Not one

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characteristic is a noun or adjective. Every single one of the fifteen characteristics is a verb. In other words, Paul did not focus so much on what love is as on what love does and does not do. Love is not so much a feeling as much as it is an action.

So, let us examine briefly the characteristics of love.

A. *Love Is Patient (13:4a)*

First, love is patient.

Paul said in verse 4a: **“Love is patient.”**

Patience signifies forbearance, slowness to repay for offenses. God is patient because he does not immediately punish those who offend him. God’s patience slows down the judgment process and opens the way for reprieve from punishment altogether. We should behave similarly because of our love for one another.

B. *Love Is Kind (13:4b)*

Second, love is kind.

Paul said in verse 4b: **“Love is . . . kind.”**

Kindness takes many forms. In general, it is soft and gentle. Occasionally, however, kindness must take the form of a careful rebuke designed to bring about a good result. Paul demonstrated this as he dealt kindly, but firmly, with the Corinthians. Jesus’ own life demonstrated such kindness (cf. Luke 13:15-17).

C. *Love Does Not Envy (13:4c)*

Third, love does not envy.

Paul said in verse 4c: **“Love does not envy.”**

One may admire another for something that person is or has, and he may desire many of the same good things for himself. Envy begins when admiration and desire turn to resentment of others for what they have. Envy is the root of many terrible actions in the world. The Bible illustrates this time and again. To envy is not to display the love of Christ, who gave up all for the sake of others

(cf. Philippians 2:3-8).

D. Love Does Not Boast (13:4d)

Fourth, love does not boast.

Paul said in verse 4d: **“Love does not. . . boast.”**

Paul’s word for **boast** (*perpereuomai*) appears only here in the New Testament, and the meaning seems to be “bragging without foundation.” Loving other people does not mean failing to acknowledge the good God has done in oneself and in others. Paul was not beyond complimenting the Corinthians. He even asserted his own standing on occasion. Love does not mean lying about human accomplishments. Rather, it means not exalting ourselves over others as if our accomplishments were based on our own merit and ability.

E. Love Is Not Arrogant (13:4e)

Fifth, love is not arrogant.

Paul said in verse 4e: **“Love. . . is not arrogant.”**

To be arrogant is to be overly self-confident or insubordinate to God and others. Arrogance is the source of much destruction and pain in the world. When one cares about other people, he does not find himself full of self-importance or arrogance toward others.

G. Love Is Not Rude (13:5a)

Sixth, love is not rude.

Paul said in verse 5a: **“Love. . . is not. . . rude.”**

Paul at least expressed the need to follow customary decorum. The definitions of **“rude”** vary from culture to culture. At the heart of rudeness is a disregard for the social customs that others have adopted. When one does not concern himself with the likes and dislikes of others, he shows a disrespect for them. Proper regard, on the other hand, indicates love for other people.

H. Love Does Not Insist on Its Own Way (13:5b)

Seventh, love does not insist on its own way.

Paul said in verse 5b: **“Love. . . does not insist on its own way.”**

Paul probably had in mind here the practice of always putting oneself in first place without due consideration of others. Many situations in life call upon Christians to choose between benefit to themselves and to others. The loving person puts the benefit of others over his or her own good. Paul exemplified this practice when he refused to receive money for his work as an apostle (9:6-15). Jesus’ humiliation was the greatest expression of putting others’ benefit above one’s own (Philippians 2:4-8).

I. Love Is Not Irritable (13:5c)

Eighth, love is not irritable.

Paul said in verse 5c: **“Love. . . is not irritable.”**

Those who love others do not become irritated and angry when others do wrong, but rather are slow to anger. They are patient. Still, there are times when anger is appropriate. Paul himself became angry when he saw the idols of Athens (Acts 17:16). Jesus became angry when he saw people’s hardness of heart (Mark 3:5) and the money changers in the temple (John 2:14-17).

J. Love Is Not Resentful (13:5d)

Ninth, love is not resentful.

Paul said in verse 5d: **“Love. . . is not. . . resentful.”**

The word for **resentful** has the connotation of “keeping a record.” People who love others do not keep meticulous records of offenses. They offer forgiveness repeatedly. Both Jesus (Luke 23:34) and Stephen (Acts 7:60) demonstrated this type of love by forgiving the people who put them to death.

K. Love Does Not Rejoice at Wrongdoing (13:6a)

Tenth, love does not rejoice at wrongdoing.

Paul said in verse 6a: **“Love. . . does not rejoice at wrongdoing.”**

Those who truly love do not enjoy seeing their loved ones stumble into sin. They take no pleasure in evil and wrongdoing because they understand that sin and evil and wrongdoing destroy people’s lives.

L. Love Rejoices with the Truth (13:6b)

Eleventh, love rejoices with the truth.

Paul said in verse 6b: **“Love. . . rejoices with the truth.”**

This characteristic is the opposite of the previous one. Many commentators link the two together as one characteristic. The term **“truth”** here suggests “living according to the truth.” Love lives according to the truth.

M. Love Bears All Things (13:7a)

Twelfth, love bears all things.

Paul said in verse 7a: **“Love bears all things.”**

Major English Bible versions translate the term **bears** (*stego*) very differently from one another. The word means “to cover or to support, and therefore protect.” Thus, love protects others from exposure, ridicule, or harm.

N. Love Believes All Things (13:7b)

Thirteenth, love believes all things.

Paul said in verse 7b: **“Love. . . believes all things.”**

Perhaps this characteristic of love is best expressed in contemporary English idiom as: “Love gives the benefit of the doubt.” Suspicion and doubt toward others do not indicate affection or love. On the contrary, when someone loves with Christlike love, he

entrusts himself to the person he loves time and again.

O. Love Hopes All Things (13:7c)

Fourteenth, love hopes all things.

Paul said in verse 7c: **“Love. . . hopes all things.”**

Loving someone requires maintaining a measure of optimism on that person’s behalf. Hope is an attitude that good will eventually come to those who may now be failing. Failure invades every Christian’s life, and it often causes others to give up on the one who fails. Yet, Christians who love continue to hope for the best. This optimism encourages others to keep moving forward. This hope is based not on the Christian, but on Christ. The hope of each Christian is that Christ will preserve him to glory. When a brother falls, it is Christ who picks him up and makes him stand (Romans 14:4). Christ is the one who promised to finish the work he began.

P. Love Endures All Things (13:7d)

And fifteenth, love endures all things.

Paul said in verse 7d: **“Love. . . endures all things.”**

Loving someone is easy when the other person does not challenge one’s affections by offending or failing. Love’s quality becomes evident when it must endure trials. The New Testament encourages Christians to persevere in their Christian walks (1 John 5:2-5). Here Paul had in mind particularly the need to persevere in love for others. Christians should look to the length and perseverance of Christ’s love as the standard for their own.

Conclusion

May God help us to learn that Christian love is the most important of all the gifts from God. We are called to pursue love, without which all of our spiritual gifts amount to nothing. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Lord Jesus, was there ever one who loved so deeply as you? Give us eyes to see that your life of love is to be our goal, our destiny, our ideal. Help us to see that of all things we have in this life, the greatest of these is love.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and love well in the exercise of your spiritual gifts that God has given you!