

A fundamental truth never to be forgotten about Spiritual gifts, is that they are worthless without love.

1. When you don't have it. (v.1-3)

What happens when you have spiritual gifts, but do not have love?

Nothing. At least nothing good. You might even do damage.

In chapter 12:31, Paul was encouraging the original audience of Christians in Corinth to desire the greater spiritual gifts. The higher gifts must follow the excellent way! The greater the spiritual gifts, the greater the need for Christ-like character!

The absence of love is a real problem for the whole architecture of spiritual gifts in the church.

Paul attempts to describe the extent of the predicament when a spiritually gifted person has no love.

Verse 1, let's take, for example, a person who can speak in tongues. A person who can speak well, and a person who has language capability, but here Paul means more than that. It is a person who can speak in spiritual tongues, the phenomenon known as glossalalia. In fact, Paul goes beyond that and says what if we have a person who can speak the very language of the angels of heaven? Paul sought for an illustration of the predicament, and Paul has found it. We have here an example of an eminently gifted person. But what if that person does not have love. Would that person still be able to bless the church?

Well, let's put it this way – the person could still speak, because the gifts are there. But with what result? What would be the value of the speaking of a gifted but loveless person to the church? The value was illustrated by Paul as a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Worthless, or more likely damaging. Remember the gong show? I think the point of a gong is that you want it to stop. When you hear the teaching of a loveless person, you want it to stop.

The word Love appears ten times in this chapter, and out of all the New Testament references to love, this chapter is known as the love chapter. It is read in many weddings, with good reason. I do wonder whether the weddings keep the chapter in the context of chapters 8-14. In other words, what this chapter says, it says in the context of spiritually gifted people needing to use their gifts informed by their love for the church, or else their efforts are useless. Certainly that applies to marriage. You can provide for your spouse using your abilities, but if you don't have love, it is a sad marriage.

Paul gets his point across with a variety of illustrations of the ineffectiveness of people with spiritual gifts serving the church without love. Verse 2 has his

second illustration, *“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.”*

Paul supposes hypothetically that this person has three areas of massive giftedness to bless the church, skills, schooling and sureness in God. 1) prophetic powers this is a fantastic teacher of God’s Word, a person who can really hold forth truth with impact 2) a person who has understanding of mysteries and knowledge – this is the set of mental tools needed and the previous training received in order to sharpen those underlying gifts needed for blessing others. We are talking about a person who is both naturally sharp and who is well-trained. But that is not all. 3) the third area of giftedness is having faith. So much faith that the person could ask God to take a mountain from here, and put it over there, and that person would believe that God would do it. This is the kind of leadership in faith that a church sometimes needs to pull through a difficulty. Okay, so all three of these are the areas of skills, schooling, and sureness in God (a personal connection to God) that this person possesses. Okay, now to the punchline of Paul’s second illustration. You take this person, and now measure their amount of love for the church. They have none. Zero. No love for the church. Well, what is the result of this person’s spiritual gifts? What would all of their abilities and faithful serving amount to? Nothing. That hits us with force. We know it is true.

Okay, we are starting to get the concept with two illustrations, but Paul has one more illustration. What about the person who does not have a skillset, but they have 100 percent, all-in, devoted commitment? Let’s say we had a person like that, Paul? Would that person be valuable without love? Let me read verbatim from Paul’s own words Paul’s answer, which is verse 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.”* Even the person who is committed, since he or she is not motivated by love, then the motivation is obvious – it must be selfish. That person wants a reputation of being the super-Christian, and they will literally do anything to get it. That is not the way to use devotion. Devotion is to be spent for the benefit of others.

Why? Because, as we discovered in chapter 12, all spiritual gifts are given to us for the benefit of others! If we don’t care whether others benefit or not, then we have lost the whole point of the church, and we are the same as the world. In three short verses, Paul has demonstrated to us that spiritual gifts in the church and service in the church, wherever there is no love, is a waste of time. No gain. No point. Paul began this whole giant section of seven chapters with these words back in chapter 8:1, that *“knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”* The most knowledgeable people, the most skilled people, the most committed people, if they lack this one element of love, for all of their work and achievements, the truth is that they accomplish nothing. Paul has shown what happens when we don’t have

love -- nothing. Nothing happens in the church that does not have love.

Teaching does not lead to understanding without love. Helping is not helpful without love. Serving is not serving without concern for the welfare of those being served.

Going to Bible conferences is worthless without concern for people to benefit from the topics covered.

Getting training and schooling and even a seminary degree is worthless without love for the church that leads to serving the church in a loving way.

Acquiring books and reading books, and getting your mind and your notes ready to teach and preach is worthless without love for those sinners saved by grace who will hear you talking. Becoming ordained as a deacon, elder, or pastor or going overseas as a missionary is a worthless achievement without love for the church that is placed above love for self.

Okay, we understand. How about we turn the corner now and come at this from a positive angle as we next study what happens when we do have love? That is what Paul does in the next four verses, which is my second point.

2. When you do have it. (v.4-7)

Oh, what a different story is the church community when we have love.

Please note that in the Greek original words here, the description of love does NOT have adjectives, but only verbs.

So, we could read verses 4-7 this way, “Love waits patiently, love shows kindness. Love does not burn with envy; love does not brag – love is not inflated with its own importance. Love does not behave with ill-mannered impropriety; love is not preoccupied with the interests of the self; love does not become exasperated into pique; love does not keep a reckoning up of evil. Love does not take pleasure at wrongdoing, but joyfully celebrates the truth. Love never tires of support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, love never gives up.”

When we have love in the church, we see a lot of loving actions.

Love waits patiently with a wise understanding that the right timing plays a huge part in securing the welfare of the other person. Love does not blunder in.

Kindness - love has the actions of showing sweetness to all persons.

No envy – love does not begrudge the status and honor of another person, but instead takes the action of delighting in the accomplishments of everyone.

No bragging – love makes no parade of self. There was in ancient Corinthian church, the issue of status seeking. That is at odds with Christ-like love.

Not arrogant – love does not cherish inflated ideas of its own importance, nor does it engage in attention seeking designed to impress others with one’s own supposed value.

Not rude – love does not behave with ill-mannered impropriety. This word

“rude” has do to do with appropriateness in public. The meaning starts out with the intrusion of tongues or prophecies at the wrong moment, but it also covers many other distracting behaviors. Love does not elbow its way into worship services, meetings, conversations, in a disruptive, discourteous, attention-seeking way. Love does not rush in, forcefully imposing personal idiosyncracies on others, for whom these bad manners are offensive. It is a misunderstanding of Jesus to believe that Jesus raised up nonconformity as a virtue. Compliance is Christ-like. We Christians cannot excuse ourselves from the rules and social conventions, the polite behavior that is customary in the circles in which God has placed us.

Not insisting on its own way – love does not seek itself, never pursuing selfish advantage. Love is not preoccupied with its own interests. True love does not seek self-gratification, or self-fulfillment to the exclusion of others. True love has an emphasis on Christ. Love has no personal agenda, only the cause of Christ. Agape love is not looking for its own advantage, but the best good of everyone. The person who loves does not desire ‘to have the world revolve around me.’

Not irritable. The heart of the word conveys the force of the English word “exasperate.” Love is not exasperated or irritated. Love is not touchy. Love is not sharp, pointed, or acidic. Paul’s choice of words here flows out of his concern for selfishness – which is seen when a person overreacts when advocating in one’s own behalf. Paul shows us that a truly loving person cannot be goaded into giving a sharp retort of irritation, no matter how exasperating the circumstances become. What circumstances? Well, some people like to parade their own gifts, while other people like to nurse their own hurts. Either way, these are circumstances offering us irritation, but the loving person handles both instances well.

Not resentful. This is the relational accountant. The person who keeps track of wrongs, and holds them against others, to the degree that they seem to deserve it. Love does not keep a plan for reckoning of evil. Love remains innocent of any such counting, reckoning, responding, or planning. Love takes no notes on who caused what injuries to me and my loved ones. No. Instead of nursing the memory of such an incident, charity refuses to notice or retain the fact that anything bad has happened at all. This is not deception, but emphasis. Love keeps its focus elsewhere, such as on whatever is true, noble, just, pure, lovely commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. Philippians 4:8. Love keeps no score of wrongdoings in marriage, in childraising, in anything related to the grandchildren and across our siblings and our extended families, in our church family, churches in the area, and across our denomination. Love hears no evil, sees no evil, speaks no evil, and even thinks no evil of others. While the relational accountant sets up the accounts and the ledgers, looking to pay offenders back in their own coin, the loving soul instead refuses to see faults and flaws in others.

Not rejoicing at wrongdoing. This is a person who is critical, attacking,

carping, or censorious. You know, always denouncing and condemning. Loving a person is not taking pleasure at the behavior that gives us the opportunity to lecture them or rebuke them about how wrong they were. Why take pleasure in rebuking?

Rejoicing with the truth. Love will congratulate and facilitate the truth. Love will applaud and cheerlead the truth in others. Love actually feels pleasure when others are well spoken of. That is the opposite of rejoicing when they are found out to be doing wrong. Love rejoices at finding out that they are doing right and doing well. Love has discovered integrity. Love joyfully celebrates truth, without manipulative devices. Love is open and honest, not defensive. The loving person has placed everything in God's hands, and so has no need to fear, and no need to hide from the truth about self, or the truth about others. Since God already knows the truth about all of us, and God has accepted us, there is no need for us to shy away from truth. Loving people embrace truth and rejoice in it. If the situation is bad, love wants to help. If the situation is good, love wants to celebrate. Love does not exaggerate, but seeks to understand the accuracy of the situation, and to decide to bear with the failings of others.

In verse 7, Paul repeats four times the phrase "all things." There are no limits. Love removes the limits. The original Greek presents verse 7 like saying no to all negations. Verse 7 could sound like this: "There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to love's faith. There is no limit to love's hope. There is no limit to love's endurance." The limits are gone. Love puts up with everything without ever ceasing to love. Love never ever tires of supporting others, love never loses faith, love never exhausts hope, and love never gives up. All the while, the loving Christian has not lost his or her wisdom and discernment, and the loving Christian has not forgotten how to distinguish black from white. Love has decided to believe the best about all people. Love never gives up on people, whatever they do. Christian love is modeled after Christ on the cross – enduring scorn, failure, ingratitude, with a resurrection on the other side. Love always lives on.

How nice when we have love in the church! That brings us to the last verses.

3. Simply the best. (v.8-13)

In verse 8, we see that love never fails.

In verses 8, 9, and 10, we see the phrase "pass away" three times. Pass away means to fall off. Like in the autumn of the year, when a tree leaf that has decayed and lost its vibrancy, finally falls off of the tree branch.

So, in verse 8, God's final judgment will cause prophecies and knowledge to fall off like leaves. In verse 10, when God completes our knowledge, then the partial will fall off like a leaf. Who can have anything to say after God's final judgment has evaluated and pronounced the conclusion of all things? Almost everything falls off like a leaf.

The whole debate about tongues is now set in this futuristic scene. Verse 8,

as for tongues, they will cease, but love never ends.

Tongues is the big question from the church in Corinth to the apostle Paul, and here Paul says that tongues will evaporate compared to the need for love.

When God comes for us, there will be no tears for Christians. When God comes for us, there will be no tongues, no prophecies, no speaking of knowledge.

The new things appear, arrive suddenly. The new will announce itself as the replacement of the old. When new knowledge comes, the old passes away. People will not simply progress toward perfection. Everything gets suddenly revitalized – prophecy, tongues, and our knowledge of God.

In verses 11 -12, Paul explains that infantile is suddenly replaced by maturity, and partial knowledge will be replaced with knowing fully. Since Paul used to speak, think and form opinions like a child does, and as a man Paul gave up childish ways, we see the adulthood replacing the infantile. As an adult, Paul can speak, think, and form opinions in a way that abandons the childish. Paul is writing about the future when spiritual gifts such as tongues will no longer be needed. In verse 12, Paul contrasts NOW with a future moment known only as THEN.

NOW – we see in a mirror dimly	THEN, we shall see face to face
NOW – I know in part	THEN, I shall know fully,
	even as I have been fully known.

The city of Corinth was well-known for making mirrors. They were not glass, as our mirrors today. Instead, the ancient mirrors were made of bronze metal, and were shiny. For the standards of that day, the mirrors of Corinth were very good quality. Paul is showing them something better will come suddenly.

Paul showed how the church was trying to take various small pieces of prophecy, and little insights from tongues-speaking, and assemble those into an understanding of Christ.

The mirror introduces a foreign object, the mirror itself, in order to establish human perceptions and concepts, but the revelation of God in Christ Jesus will mean, as the apostle John wrote in 1 John 3:2, “*WE SHALL SEE [CHRIST] AS HE IS.*”

We shall see Christ not indirectly, but indirectly.

We shall see Christ not partially, but fully.

We shall know Christ not in part, but fully, even as we have been fully known.

We started by chapter 12:31, Paul telling us to “...earnestly desire the higher gifts,” and that Paul would “show you a still more excellent way.” Here now we have decided that the prophecy and tongues are not the higher gifts, and not the more excellent way. So what is it?

We have 3 possibilities left for the higher gifts and the more excellent way. – these three - faith, hope, and love.

Faith will depart when we get to SEE Christ face to face.
Hope will vanish when the things hoped for come about and we receive them.

But Love comes to completion and grows more when the perfection and completion of God have been fully given.

Love will always exist in the self-giving form in which Christ and the cross have revealed it.

All of the other aspects of today's church will be modified – worship, understanding, faith, and hope. These ministries will be redundant – the teacher, theologian, preacher, and evangelist, who will not carry out their work in heaven.

However, to the extent that we learn to truly love God and love others, to have respect and concern for God's glory and Christ's church above self is grounded in the very nature of Christ, as revealed in the gospel.

All that will remain is love.

Love will never become redundant.

Love will never become obsolete.

Love will never become irrelevant.

Conclusion:

As the church went through difficulties and the pain of divisions and arguments, Paul wrote this chapter to ask one question - what is your highest priority? Love.

But the apostles are careful to define love by Christ crucified.

1 John 3:16, *"By this we know love, that [Christ] laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."*

Love is defined by Christ's death and love never ends, because Christ rose again.

Jesus summarized all the law with 2 commandments.

The first is to love God with all you heart, soul, strength and mind.

The second commandment is to love others as you love yourself.

The most important command is to love God.

The second most important command is to love one another.

Whatever else we discover about spiritual gifts, has to retain this understanding.

Loving each other in the church is more important than any spiritual giftedness, any position, and any serving in the church.

Loving is not merely one thing among others that we are called to do.

Love is like oxygen. Without it, every church dies.

Our highest priority is given to us by God – to love others in what we say, what we believe, and what we do.