

Week 13, 1 Corinthians 13

Hook



Main Point: Love is superior to all spiritual gifts and should motivate their use.

Current Event

Have you ever made a grand gesture that was motivated by love? Below are a few examples of men who, inspired by love, took action to impress the object of their affection.

- Reed Harris decided to surprise his girlfriend with a proposal by slipping the engagement ring into her milkshake. He was shocked when she challenged those at her table to see who could drink their milkshake the fastest; she promptly ingested the ring and went to the hospital for x-rays. This didn't stop Harris; he simply substituted the x-ray of the ring for a ring and popped the question.¹
- Lefkos Hajji had an elaborate proposal planned. He would have a florist insert an engagement ring into a helium balloon, provide his beloved with a pin and allow her to "pop the question." Promptly after leaving the florist's shop, a gust of wind tore the balloon string from Hajji's hand and took the \$12,000 ring with it. He never recovered the ring.²
- A man in southern China planned to surprise his girlfriend with a special delivery. Hu Seng climbed into a large cardboard box and had a friend ship him to his girlfriend's office. The unaware courier mixed up the addresses on his packages that day and instead of being in his cardboard prison for the 30 minutes he anticipated, Seng was in

¹ http://www.today.com/id/29462344/ns/today-today_style/t/gulp-she-swallowed-her-own-engagement-ring/#.V9BdGWVJ2YU

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-engagement-idUSN1439471720080314>

the box for three hours. The box had no holes for additional air and thus proved to be quite dangerous. When he finally arrived at his desired destination, Seng was in need of paramedics.³

- James Miller's relationship with his girlfriend was crumbling, so he designed a plan to communicate how much he truly loved her. The 20-year-old soldier dressed as Cupid, wielded a bow and suction cup arrows and ran across the field of a Premiership soccer game. The idea seemed perfect. It was Valentine's day; Miller's girlfriend was in the crowd, and he just knew that as he sprinted the field that he would steal his girlfriend's heart again. Instead, Miller was arrested, threatened with a court martial, fined, banned from all soccer games for three years, and his girlfriend dumped him.⁴

Has love ever motivated you to make a grand gesture?

Are you perceptive at detecting someone's true motivations for his or her actions? If yes, then how do you do it?

Describe the kind of love that God has for us. What specific actions has His love motivated you to take this week?

³ <http://www.news18.com/news/india/man-couriers-himself-to-girlfriend-almost-dies-503353.html>

⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1155349/Stupid-Cupid-Soldier-streaked-football-pitch-firing-love-arrows-ditched-girlfriend-face-court-martial.html>

Week 13, 1 Corinthians 13

Book

Main Point: Love is superior to all spiritual gifts and should motivate their use.

Text Summary: 1 Corinthians 13

This chapter is an abrupt insertion amidst Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14.⁵ The Corinthian culture was obsessed with learning deep, spiritual "secret knowledge" that would set them apart from their peers,⁶ so this insertion is Paul's way of interrupting his teaching on gifts to remind them that understanding spiritual gifts is not the preeminent thing to aim for in the Christian life. Instead, godly *love* is the most important characteristic of a believer and makes one truly spiritual. In this chapter, Paul asserts that spiritual gifts require godliness for true effectiveness.⁷ Any type of talent, gift, speech, power or act of service—even if it's divinely given—is worthless to God without love. Paul also teaches that the nature of love is permanent and will carry into eternity, unlike temporal spiritual gifts. While gifts are important and should be exercised, believers should strive most to experience and express love, as it is the only gift that lasts forever.

1 Corinthians 12:31–13:7 [Read]

Sub-point: Spiritual gifts without love are worthless.

Paul starts this section by saying, "I will show still a more excellent way" (12:31). This transitional sentence functions as Paul's "reset button" amidst his explanation of spiritual gifts, drawing his hearers to pause and ponder the true motivation behind their intense interest in spiritual gifts.⁸

In verses 1–3, Paul exposes the areas where the Corinthians usually find their significance, namely, in what they *say*, *know*, and *do*.⁹ In a culture obsessed with impressive and eloquent speech, Paul intentionally includes "speaking in tongues" as being worthless without love (v. 1). Speaking eloquently or even in tongues is just useless clamor without the proper motivation. Cognizant that these believers also sought significance in what they *know*, Paul mentions how "prophetic powers" and "understanding all mysteries" are also pointless without love (v. 2). Possessing intelligence, insight, or knowledge does not impress God when a believer lacks a loving heart. Lastly in verse 3, Paul deliberately exposes the Corinthians who may not *say* or

⁵ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 180.

⁶ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 231.

⁷ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 180.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁹ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 231.

know much, but consider themselves important because they *do* much. By stating that those who “give away” all they have (including their very own bodies!) gain nothing without love, Paul asserts that abundant good works, like generosity and even martyrdom, will not win God’s favor without genuine personal character. Paul warns the do-gooders that even acts that look like amazing expressions of love can be motivated by self-promotion instead of genuine concern for others.¹⁰

In sum, verses 1–3 assert that while spiritual gifts are of great importance to these Corinthian believers, the motivator and foundation of these gifts should be their preeminent concern.¹¹ Why they want them should be more important than what the particular gifts are. Paul makes it very clear that the motivator and foundation of spiritual gifts and the entirety of Christian life is *love*.

Now that these believers understand that godly love should be their preeminent goal, Paul explains what love *is* in verses 4–7. To communicate love effectively, Paul personifies love using 16 verbs in just three verses. It is clear that Paul wants to show not simply what love feels like, but what it *looks* like manifested in the body of believers.¹² Each of Paul’s descriptions about love has both a negative and positive function. Negatively, Paul’s choice of verbs reflects precisely where these believers do not evidence love. Positively, each verb choice dramatically describes the loving nature of God to these believers.¹³

How does knowing the cultural values of Corinth inform how we read Paul’s inclusion of envy, boastfulness, arrogance and rudeness in verse 4?

Why does Paul repeat “all things” four times in verse 7?

Compare and contrast the definition the Scriptures give to love and the way culture might define love.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 [Read]

Sub-point: Love is forever.

¹⁰ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 181.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹² Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 309.

¹³ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 181-182.

Paul transitions into verse 8 by again contrasting the prized spiritual gifts of Corinth (prophecy, tongues and knowledge) with love, but now with a different emphasis. Instead of focusing on the *actions* of love, Paul focuses now on the *permanence* of love.¹⁴

Following his introduction that “love never ends,” Paul compares this permanent love with temporal gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge.¹⁵ Two of these gifts (tongues and knowledge) are Paul’s favorite and preferred gifts (14:1–40); these three gifts are specifically named but represent all gifts; these three are chosen because of their relevance to the Corinthian context.¹⁶ By repeating “pass away” three times in this text, Paul asserts that spiritual gifts will not last forever; these gifts will not survive the transition from this age into the fullness of the age to come.¹⁷ Concerning the timing of the ceasing of gifts, Taylor remarks “Whether or not any gifts have ceased already is a matter of God’s choice (12:11, 18, 28).”¹⁸

Not only are gifts temporary but they are also partial; both prophecy and knowledge are highlighted as being incomplete (verse 9). These partial things (spiritual gifts) will pass away when the fullness is experienced at Christ’s return. Paul provides two illustrations in verses 11–12 to flesh out his point.

The first illustration is that of Paul’s putting away childish things upon his entrance into manhood; the significance is a progression from childishness to maturity. So, too, the Church is intended to move from immaturity to maturity and spiritual gifts are intended to aid in that process (Ephesians 4:11–16). The Church becomes fully mature (or “perfect”) only upon Christ’s return. At that point, just as a man puts away childish things, all spiritual gifts will cease.

The second illustration helps the reader to understand that the gifts are only partial. Corinth was famous for its bronze mirrors, mirrors that would reflect but not with crisp precision. Now, we see God dimly and one day (at Christ’s return) we will see Him fully, face to face. The gifts will no longer be necessary as the things we have known partially (consider prophecy and knowledge) will be made known in full.

To conclude in verse 13, Paul again places love as the preeminent goal of the believer, even above faith and hope. Scholars suggest that Paul is not making a theological statement about the nature of faith, hope and love; rather, the triad is shorthand for the fullness of the Christian life.¹⁹ Among all the things that identify a believer, love is the greatest. Faith and hope are

¹⁴ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 314.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

¹⁹ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 184.

obviously foundational elements of the Christian experience, but even they will not need to carry into eternity,²⁰ for faith will become sight and hope will be realized. The one thing Paul says will assuredly be in the next life is love.

In sum, when perfection arrives in the final coming of Christ, love will be present but the gifts will not. For the Corinthians and for us as well, this means that the true indicator of maturity and spirituality is love, not the exercise of temporal gifts.²¹

What is Paul's point in using the child/adult analogy in verse 11?

How does Numbers 12:6–8 inform your reading of verse 12?

While we know God in a partial way now, how does God know us (v. 12)?

What actions can your Bible Fellowship take to become known as a class that loves well?

²⁰ Ibid., p. 184.

²¹ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 317.

Week 13, 1 Corinthians 13

Took



Main Point: Love is superior to all spiritual gifts and should motivate their use.

Discussion

Recall the stories of romantic displays from the Hook section of today's lesson.

Recall a time when someone demonstrated a grand display of agape love (the love described in today's passage) toward you.

Describe three ways in which you can demonstrate agape love toward three individuals this week.

Lesson Conclusion

In a culture where people set themselves apart by the characteristics of talent, knowledge, or ability, Paul instructs these believers to be characterized preeminently by love. Spiritual gifts are very important and should be exercised with eagerness and excellence in this life, but Paul maintains that they are not the entire point of the Christian life. Love is a more excellent goal than any other goal of the Christian life, and without it, spiritual gifts are pointless. Paul makes clear that one cannot exercise a spiritual gift excellently without loving motives. The entire point of being gifted by God is to love and build up others. Without that motive, even the highest of spiritual gifts are hollow. Also, love is to be desired above all because of its permanence into eternity. While many parts of the life of a believer will cease in the coming kingdom, love will remain. A believer should seek love above all because it is the only God-empowered gift that lasts forever.

Challenge

Identify places of false worth. We, like the Corinthian believers, seek our significance in many things outside of God and His love for us. Where in your life do you assume you are more spiritual because of what you *say*, *know*, or *do*? While you don't live in Corinth, what obsessions

of American culture have drifted into your walk with God and choked out your love for Him and others? List these areas and habits and return to God's love as your primary source of significance.

Read/pray through Romans 8:35–39. This text is another angle Paul takes at love. Read through it and pray that it will transform the view you have of both God and other believers.

Restore a strained relationship. Paul gives convicting instructions on what love should look like in our lives—patient, kind, not envious, not arrogant, not insisting on your own way, not resentful, able to bear all things, and so on. We all have violated one of these descriptions of love with a neighbor, friend, family member, coworker or spouse. With whom in your life have you consistently insisted on your own way or been resentful toward? Whom have you been jealous of or impatient with? Follow Jesus' instructions and settle the matter between the two of you. Make a plan this week to confess your unloving sin in that relationship and ask for his/her forgiveness.