

How's Your Love Life? I Corinthians 13: 1-13

Introduction: In his book *Charity and It's Fruits*, Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) asks the question, "what makes the church like heaven?" His answer was one word: love. First Corinthians 13 is one of the most well know passages of the Bible. The Greek word for love (*agape*) is used 9 times in the Greek text and 8 in the ESV. Some think this may be an early Christian hymn. It is clear within the context that this chapter is an integral part of a discussion Paul is giving on spiritual gifts and worship in the church (chs. 12-14). Richard Hayes is right when he says, "The purpose of chapter 13 is to portray love as the *sine qua non* of the Christian life and to insist that love must govern the exercise of all the gifts of the Spirit" (Hayes, *Interpretation*, 221). In examining all of Paul's writings concerning the Holy Spirit, one thing is clear. Bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), namely love, is more important than the manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit (Bruce, *TNCBC*, 124). This chapter neatly divides into three basic sections.

I. Love is essential 13:1-3

Love was misunderstood in the 1st century. It is misunderstood in the 21st century too. Paul writes to correct that. In this chapter, he will not define love so much as describe love. He begins by telling us what it isn't.

1) Without love it does not matter what you say 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.” (13:1). One may have the ability with soaring oratory to move the hearts and minds of men and women, boys and girls, but without love it will never move the heart of God. Paul’s reference to “angelic tongues” should not be pressed to refer to an ecstatic, other worldly utterances. It is most certainly hyperbolic (Schreiner, *TNTC*, 273). He most likely is trying to draw as sharp a contrast as possible with love (Carson, *Showing*, 58). Have you ever been to a cymbal solo? Doubtful. Without love you may have the gift of beautiful speech, even the gift of prophecy, tongues, or interpretation of tongues (12:10), but without love it is just a lot of useless noise.

2) Without love it does not matter what you know 13:2

“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” (13:2). You may have a PhD, more degrees than a thermometer, and display great insight into deep truths that no one else can fathom. Without love it is not just that your scholarship is nothing, you yourself are nothing. You may have knowledge bursting from your head, but if you do not have love flowing from your heart you are nothing. Pharisees were brilliant theologians. They knew the law and the scriptures inside out.

They could split a theological hair with expert precision, but you could not find godly love in their heart with a microscope. God says, you may have the gift of knowledge (12:8) and exercise it superbly, but without love you are a great big nothing.

3) Without love it does not matter what you believe 13:2

Paul then adds, "...and if I have all faith (cf. 12:9), so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing." This is not saving faith, but likely the gift of faith Paul previously referenced. You may have mountain moving faith, but if you do not have love, you are nothing more than a molehill. Remember, "even the demons believe – and shudder!" (James 2:19). Faith without love equals being a zero in God's economy.

4) Without love it does not matter what you do 13:3

"If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (13:3). Even the ultimate sacrifice of one's life in martyrdom for a great cause or belief is meaningless without love. Now, there is a textual issue we must address in verse 3. Is the best translation "boast" or "burn?" In the *CSB* translation we read: "I give over my body to boast." If you brag about what you did without the primary motivation of love, it gains you nothing. Other translations, like the *ESV*, following different manuscripts use the verb "to burn." I believe "burn" is more

persuasive. Make the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom. Your body goes up in flames. Without love, you get another great big “zero” on God’s scorecard. I like how D.A. Carson puts it, “If Paul were addressing the modern church, perhaps he would extrapolate further: You Christians who prove your spirituality by the amount of theological information you can cram into your heads, I tell you that such knowledge by itself proves nothing. And you who affirm the Spirit’s presence in your meetings because there is a certain style of worship (whether formal and stately or exuberant and spontaneous), if your worship patterns are not expressions of love, you are spiritually bankrupt. You who insist that speaking in tongues attests a second work of the Spirit, a baptism of the Spirit, I tell you that if love does not characterize your life, there is not evidence of even a first work of the Spirit. In none of these instances does Paul depreciate spiritual gifts, but he refuses to recognize any positive assessment of any of them unless the gift is [exercised] in love.” (D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 61.)

II. Love is expressive

13:4-8

In verses 4-8a, Paul provides his portrait of love, a portrait that looks like the Lord Jesus! He uses 16 descriptive terms. They address the character qualities a Christian should put on display day in and day out.

As we enter into this section, we again need to be clear that Paul is not negating the importance of spiritual gifts. His point is any and all spiritual gifts are dispensable, but love is indispensable (Carson, *Showing*, 61). Paul describes love; not in theoretical, philosophical, or even theological terms, but mainly practical. This is love in real life! (Carson, *ibid*).

1) Love is Patient

“Love is patient...” (13:4). Love suffers long. Literally, “love is long tempered.” Love has a long fuse. It also has a short memory. This is a word that describes how we treat people, not how we deal with circumstances (though we need patience there too!). Carson says it speaks of “endurance of injustices without retaliation” (p. 62). (cf. Gal. 5:22)

2) Love is Kind

“...love is kind...” (13:4). The word used here only appears this one time in the New Testament. It beautifully complements “patient.” It is grace extended to those who don’t deserve it. It is “...quick to pay back with kindness what it received in hurt” (Carson, *Showing*, 62). A slap is returned with a kiss is a good picture! Mark Twain rightly said, “Kindness is a language the deaf can hear and the blind can see.” (cf. Gal. 5:22)

3) Love Does Not Envy

“...Love does not envy...” (13:4). Love does not have an inferiority complex about what it does not have. True love isn’t jealous. We do not crave and idolize what others have. No, we actually rejoice in what the Lord has given them; the gift or the ability. We delight in God’s goodness and grace to others. Love says I am content in what God has given me (including my spiritual gift(s)), and I delight in what God has given others (including their spiritual gift(s)). We are one body. One family. One team. (cf. Gal. 5:21)

4) Love is Not Boastful

“...is not boastful...” (13:4). Love does not have a superiority complex either! If envy wants what others have, boasting brags on what it has (and that others don’t). The reason love does not boast is because it always deflects praise to others and the glory to God. Now let’s be honest. Sometimes, it is even harder to love like this when you are the successful person. Remember, “If you ever see a turtle on a fencepost it didn’t get there by itself.” In fact, you might say that one of the great measurements of love is humility; “not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less” (C.S. Lewis). You will see this amplified with everything else Paul says about love momentarily.

5) Love is Not Arrogant

“...is not arrogant...” (13:4). Love does not have the peacock syndrome! It is not full of itself. *The Message*: “love does not strut or have a swelled head.” It does not think of itself more than it should (Phil. 2:3-4).

6) Love is Not Rude

“...is not rude” (13:5). Love does not treat others poorly. “It does not act disgracefully” (*NASV*). It doesn’t cut the other person down and it doesn’t cut the other person off. It doesn’t interrupt when the other person is talking and it doesn’t ignore the other person when they are talking. Simply put, love is always courteous. It doesn’t cut in line. In fact, it lets others go first. Carson says, “It is well said that you can spot a gentleman not by the way he addresses his king but by the way he addresses his servants (p. 62).
Question: how well do you treat and tip waiters and waitresses?!

7) Love is Not Self-Seeking

“...does not insist on its own way (*ESV*), it is not self-seeking” (*CSB*) (13:5). Jesus Christ himself exemplified that true love is an unselfish love. It is a loving you (others), before I love me (yourself). If Jesus had had been self-seeking, he would not have gone to the cross. If Jesus had been self-seeking we would all be on the ocean of sin in a boat without a paddle (Merritt).
True love says, “I made a commitment to place your needs above my

needs.” The love from above doesn’t say, “What can you do for me?” It says, “What can I do for you?” I will give you what is mine to bless you.

8) Love is Not Irritable

“...is not irritable...” (13:5). Love is not cantankerous. “It is not provoked” (*NASV*). Be honest. Sometimes, it is very easy to get irritable with people who are irritating! True love realizes we all can be irritating at times. True love realizes that we all have our own faults. The easiest way to put it is “love does not nitpick.” James said it best when he said, “*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger*” (Jas 1:19).

9) Love Does Not Keep a Record of Wrongs

“...and does not keep a record of wrongs” (*ESV*, “resentful”; *NASV*, “does not keep an account of a wrong suffered” 13:5). An accounting major would appreciate this word, because it is actually an accounting term or a bookkeeping term. Literally, it means “love does not keep a ledger on evil.” Love does not hold a grudge. It leaves a lot of room for other people to make mistakes and when they do it forgives them. Love doesn’t keep a list in its backpack or on its cell phone to pull out whenever you need to remind someone of when they did you wrong. Love doesn’t need a file on the computer of things people have done to hurt it.

10) Love Finds No Joy in Unrighteousness

“Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing” (13:6). Love does not delight in evil. “It finds pleasure in virtue and what is good” (Schreiner, 277). In contrast, the wicked “rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perseverance of evil” (Prov. 2:14).

11) Love Rejoices in the Truth

“Love rejoices with the truth.” (13:6). Love finds pleasure in the truth. It celebrates it. That means when you really love someone, you are willing to both tell them the truth when they need to hear it (Eph. 4:15), and you are also willing to receive the truth from them when you need to hear it. It may be painful and not pleasant. But, it will be what is best. Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” Rejoice in the truth, even when it hurts.

12) Love Bears All Things, 13) Believes All Things, 14) Hopes All Things, 15) Endures All Things

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (13:7). A key word is repeated four times in v. 7. It is the word “all.” It is the Greek word *panta*. You see it all the time in your dictionary. Pantheism is the belief that God is equal to *all things*. A pantry is a cupboard where you can store *all things*. A panacea is a cure for all things. A panoply is an array of *all things*. *Panta* means *all things*. What Paul is saying is that

love always gives the benefit of the doubt and hangs in there. It is optimistic and won't quit. It always looks for the good, the positive. I love saying it like this: "when the going gets tough, love keeps going."

There is a staying power to true-love that is like a flame that cannot be quenched. Love takes the long view not the short view. It keeps the big picture in mind. It hangs in there with other people even under the worst circumstances and refuses to throw in the towel. For married couples, it takes seriously those words "for better for worse" and "til death do us part." You simply cannot kill a love that bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. It is a love that truly will last through all adversity and stand the test of time. A beautiful complement to this is Solomon's love chapter in Song of Solomon 8:5-14.

13) Love never ends

13:8

"Love never ends." Some translate the first phrase of v. 8 as "love never fails" (*NIV*; *NASV*). However, love never ends captures best what Paul means. Spiritual gifts are temporary, but not love. Spiritual gifts will run their course and fade away, but not love. Love has an eternal and enduring quality, just like the God who is love (1 John 4:8, 16).

III. Love is enduring

13:8-13

As if Paul has not already said enough about one of the most powerful words in the Greek (*agape*) and English language, he drives the point home with a knockout blow in these final verses.

1) Love is Permanent

13:8-12

“Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end. 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 put aside childish things. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known” (13:8-12). Three words says it all, “*Love never ends.*” As necessary, as profitable, as needed, as spiritual gifts are, they are temporary. They will end. The most highly valued gifts by the Corinthian church such as tongues, knowledge, prophecy will all cease to exist. They will do so “...*when the perfect comes...*” (v.10). There is some debate over what “the perfect” refers to. The context and the overarching revelatory context of Scripture convinces us this is referring to “...the arrival of the eschaton, when all God’s purposes for human beings will be realized and fulfilled” (Schreiner, *TNTC*, 280). In other words, it refers to the “...life in the world to come after Jesus reappears

on earth” (Blomberg, *TNAC*, 260). One cautionary note: “Perfection”...is not the Parousia (the 2nd coming) itself, but the state of affairs brought about by the arrival of the Parousia” (Carson, *Showing*, 69). When the King returns, the gifts will have served their purpose. They will gladly depart into retirement. Love can never end, because if God is love and God cannot end, then certainly love cannot end. Heaven will be the first time ever that we will experience perfect love; not just a perfect love from God, but a perfect love for God and a perfect love for each other.

2) Love is Preeminent

13:13

“Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love” (13:13). The reason why love is the greatest is because love is the one virtue that we will take into eternity. Faith becomes sight in heaven. Hope is completely fulfilled in heaven, but love never ends. Love never ceases. It is because of the magnificent love of God that our faith will be rewarded by perfect sight and our hope will be rewarded by total fulfillment.

Faith and hope will have no needed purpose in heaven. Everything that is true will be known and everything good will be everywhere. That is why Paul puts love on the top of the Mt. Everest of spiritual qualities. Of faith, hope, and love, the most God-like is love, because “God does not have faith or hope, but ‘*God is love*’” (I John 4:8). God did not send his Son into the

world because he believed in the world and had hope in this world. He sent His Son because he loved this world.

Conclusion

There is a divine element to true love that can never be dismissed. It is really impossible for this world to know what real love it without knowing the God who is love and the God who gives love. You want to see 1 Cor. love in action, a portrait of this matchless virtue? Look to the Son of God. Look to Jesus. Here is love on perfect display.