

A More Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 12-14

Chapter 13

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ²And though I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Introduction

It's been said that presentation is everything. In a fancy restaurant they don't merely pour the chocolate sauce on the dessert, they zigzag it on. While it may not be true that presentation is everything (if the chef accidentally uses salt instead of sugar the beauty of the presentation will be short-lived) it certainly is something. Dismissing the message because of the messenger is something people tend to do with great ease. If your speech is gruff or coarse people will generally have little interest in what you might have to say.

I remember gravitating to those who gave me winsome smiles and could convey the genuine impression that they truly cared for me. Over the years I have grown to have a bit of distrust and even disdain for those who have mastered the art of the compassionate veneer. Not that there is anything necessarily foul about a charitable facade, but it is so often displayed at the expense of true content. When it comes to matters of faith I've come to appreciate prophets over pals.

Nonetheless, both content and presentation have their place in Christian fellowship. Paul exhorts us, not merely to speak, but to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Often quoted at weddings, this "love" chapter actually has, as its context, the proper use of spiritual gifts. This chapter has little to say regarding continuation or cessation of the supernatural gifts (our larger topic) but we would be remiss in our study of these gifts if we omitted the chapter designed to govern our disposition in the use of them.

The apostle Paul began his discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter twelve of 1 Corinthians. He ended that chapter promising to show us a "more excellent way." It is a more excellent way for Christians to interact, edify, challenge, and nurture one another. And because the body of Christ more properly functions when this excellence is pursued, God is more properly glorified.

This more excellent way is not actually a gift per se but a virtue which is to be present in the exercise of all gifts. The more excellent way is, of course, love. Does anybody mind if we speak of love for a bit? It is quite startling how high this virtue ranks.

If I Have Not Love

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ²And though I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³And though I bestow

all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing (13:1-3).

Messengers Don't Nullify Messages

Paul's main point here should be obvious to us all; love is to adorn every attribute. If love does not adorn my other gifts I am a clanging cymbal, I am nothing, and it profits me nothing. Let me be quick to say, however, that the indictment is against the messenger not the message. My lack of ability to be loving does not pardon the hearer any more than a father's poor leadership gives license to his child's insubordination.

It is the tongue-speaker, the man of knowledge, the man of great faith, the good-deed-doer, and the martyr who become nothing. Their loveless disposition in no way impugns the actual claim the prophetic message has on the hearer. In other words, if I speak the truth—but it is not spoken in love—it is still the truth and, therefore, still binding upon the hearer. My guilt in speaking in an unloving manner (like the father who exasperates his child) is that I am tempting my hearer to disregard the message.

The use of gifts (any gifts) for notoriety, prestige, or to legitimate or elevate oneself is disgraceful. If we do not have love, the exercise of spiritual gifts is neither impressive to God nor profitable to us.

Tongues of Angels?

How does this passage speak to the issue of sign-gifts? Some use verse one as a proof-text for the incoherent babble¹ of the modern tongues movement—the tongues of angels. Paul may be speaking poetically here but even if he isn't there is no account of an angel speaking anything but a discernable language.

The Truth About Love

Christians are to exercise the gifts given to them by God in a loving manner. So what does it mean to love? Do I get to define it myself? Some pit love against truth. They say, "Give me love and the truth will come." After all, love, as we shall see, is greater than faith and hope! Would you rather live in a church, home, or nation full of love or truth? Most people would say "love"—a dangerous answer.

So, far from being mutually exclusive, love and truth are interdependent. In other words, without truth, love becomes indiscernible and is generally reduced to passion. It is not uncommon for the concept of love to be thrown around by those who desire sexual promiscuity. Is that true love? Apart from knowing the truth about love how can we question this?

True love flows from genuine, biblical truth. Since the presentation of the true gospel is the power of salvation (Romans 1:16) we can conclude that truth doesn't merely define love, it is the means by which true love is produced. An undefined false love produces mere chaos and licentiousness. The apostle Paul, realizing this, puts forth his doctrine (truth) of love.

Love Is...

Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;⁵ does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;⁶ does not rejoice in iniquity, but

¹ I don't use these terms in a derogatory but rather a technical way.

rejoices in the truth;⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (13:4-7).

It would be overly ambitious at this point to pursue an exhaustive study of love. The nuts and bolts of loving God and loving our neighbor are found in summary in the Ten Commandments²; what we have before us is the lubricant. Love most assuredly consists of outward duties but it also has an inward temperament.

There will be a repetitive theme of love's *patience*—it “suffers long.” It's defined by Vine's as “a quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish; it is the opposite of anger, and is associated with mercy.”³ James puts it nicely:

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;²⁰ for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:19, 20).

I personally have a forty-eight hour rule. If I find myself offended, I (if possible) give it two days (a time when I pray, calm down, and seek counsel) before responding. Some may need only a few minutes, others weeks.

Love is not passionately reactionary, but rather it is *kind*. That is to say that genuine love should have a mildness to it. This, of course, naturally flows from patience or long-suffering.

Love does not *envy*. Joseph's brothers envied his father's love for him leading them into great evil (Acts 7:9). A lack of godly contentment inhibits true love. When our friends have good fortune, we should rejoice with them and resist becoming bitter because we feel short-changed.

Love does not *parade itself* or put itself forward or vaunt its works. In other words a person who is acting in true love doesn't put a shingle on his forehead announcing his great love. It's not a show. This becomes especially difficult when you've been making the silent effort of loving and are accused of neglect. Don't be tempted to hang the shingle. If you don't resist this temptation you will violate the next law of love which is to avoid being *puffed up* or arrogant. In modern terms, avoid being full of yourself.

Love does *not behave rudely*, shamefully, or unbecomingly. A loving person is circumspect. He is aware of his surroundings and considers those surroundings in his speech and manners. There was a woman who used to openly criticize her spouse in public venues. Her criticisms may or may not have been valid, but her lack of propriety was rude and not an act of love toward her husband.

Love does *not seek its own*. In other words genuine love is not searching for reciprocation. The reason we fail in every aspect of love leading up to this (patience, envy, parading oneself, being puffed up, and rudeness) is because we have a secret agenda of reception. And when due time has gone by and our ship has not come in our paltry love is revealed for what it is.

It is this type of false love that is *easily provoked*. If I am not concerned with what I get in return I am not tempted to rage when it doesn't come. It is also this type of false love that *thinks evil*. The New American Standard translates this, “does not take into account a wrong *suffered*” and cleverly rendered by one theologian “it meditateth no

² This is not to say that the Ten Commandments do not include the inward temperament. But the inward temperament seems to be Paul's main emphasis.

³ Vine, W. 1981; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *Vine's Expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words*. Revell: Old Tappan NJ

mischief.” In other words true love does not keep a ledger for retaliation. As the man said, “When my wife gets mad she doesn’t get hysterical, she gets historical.”

True love does *not rejoice in iniquity*. I should not be happy when I find my suspicions about my acquaintances are true and they are indeed evil. We are to lament at evil and rejoice when truth prevails.

What does it mean that love *bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things*? Does this mean love is not wise? That it does not discriminate? Certainly not! That *love bears all things* mirrors that long-suffering of which we already spoke; that love believes all things does not mean love believes contradictions, but that love is not overly suspicious. Calvin wrote,

...that a Christian man will reckon it better to be imposed upon by his own kindness and easy temper, than to wrong his brother by an unfriendly suspicion.⁴

To hope all things is the kind of love that recognizes God’s power to change lives and grant repentance. Matthew Henry explains,

And when, in spite of inclination, it cannot believe well of others, it will yet hope well, and continue to hope as long as there is any ground for it.⁵

And yet a third time Paul puts forth the notion of patience. True *love endures*. It is this emphasis which leads into Paul’s next point.

Love Never Fails

Love never fails. But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away.⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part.¹⁰ But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.¹³ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love (13:8-13).

When the Perfect Comes

There is some debate as to what Paul means by “when that which is perfect has come.” It very likely refers to the Second Coming. There is no strength in using this passage as an argument for the cessation or continuation of gifts so I will not pursue that here. Paul’s point is the transitory⁶ and inferior nature of gifts compared to faith, hope, and love.

Grow Up

There appears to be an accusation in the tone of Paul’s writing that they are treating their gifts as children do. It is truly awkward and sometimes disheartening

⁴ Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin’s Commentaries: 1 Corinthians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin’s Commentaries (1 Co 13:7). Ages Software: Albany, OR

⁵ Henry, M. 1996, c1991. *Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: Complete and unabridged in one volume* (1 Co 13:4). Hendrickson: Peabody

⁶ This also refutes that notion that the immutability of God requires the immutability of gifts.

when we buy a nice gift for our children only to find them arguing about who gets to play in the box. Paul's point seems to be that they are viewing the gifts as an end in themselves and that these wonderful gifts they prize so highly will one day evaporate. It is a childish endeavor to exercise the gifts of God in such a way as to forget the love of God.

Faith, Hope, and Love

Faith is the knowledge of God and His divine will. Hope is the perseverance in that faith. These both, of course, will no longer be necessary in glory. Love, however, is eternal. A loving use of gifts facilitates faith, hope, and love as well. Let us prayerfully consider whether or not this is the actual case in our lives.

And it may oil the gears of our love even further to ponder the words of Jesus,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34).

I was doing a radio broadcast on the five points of Calvinism⁷ when a caller sought to gently chastise me. "When are we going to quit discussing 'isms' and talk about love?" I could almost here the grumblings of the entire radio audience giving their hearty, "Amen!" But is it not obvious that we cannot begin to know how to love others until we begin to understand how Christ loves us? We need to know what we are imitating.

A love which has the imitation of Christ at its heart will truly be an enduring love—a true love—a more excellent way.

⁷ That man is totally depraved, dead in his sins, and can offer nothing to God, not even his own faith; that God's love and election for us was without condition—He doesn't love or choose us because of some quality or attribute He saw in us; that the atoning work of Christ on the cross was effective to save those who were the objects of God's love and election; that the love of God, by His Spirit, would irresistibly overcome our rebellion; and that God's love is so enduring that His true children would persevere in this grace unto glory.

Questions for Study

1. How are Christians to speak the truth? Why is this important (page 1)?
2. What is the context of the “love” chapter (page 1)?
3. If you exercise great gifts without love, what are you (page 2)?
4. Does a loveless messenger actually nullify the message (page 2)?
5. Are the “tongues of angels” in verse one a good argument for an indistinguishable language (page 2)?
6. What’s more important, truth or love? Explain (pages 2, 3).
7. Discuss the aspects of godly love (pages 3-5).
8. Why does Paul bring up the idea of being like a child (page 5)?
9. Define “faith” and “hope” (page 5).
10. What is one important reason for understanding the doctrines of grace (Calvinism—page 5)?