

Love Never Fails

1 Cor 13:1-13

SS Lesson for 10/25/2020

Devotional Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: 1 Cor 13:13

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

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Seeking love always is seeking the building up of others (1 Cor 8:1)

In seeking, we must be willing to follow its way (1 Cor 14:1)

We must try to excel in the gift of love so as to help others (1 Cor 14:12)

Everything we do should be done in love (1 Cor 16:14)

Gifts without love (2)

Gifts without love can become a stumbling block to others (Rom 14:15)

Gifts in themselves is nothing, only faith and love working through the gifts (Gal 5:6)

Gifts are only effective if they are done out of a pure heart and good conscience toward God (1 Tim 1:5)

Giving without love (3)

Giving in the wrong way is mistreating God (Matt 25:45)

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To be able to bear with others, it takes humility through love (Eph 4:2)

As God's chosen people, Christians should be covered with humility and love (Col 3:12)

Loving humility shows godly wisdom (James 3:17)

Love is unselfish (5)

Love says to seek the good of others (1 Cor 10:24)

Seek the good of others to aid in their salvation (1 Cor 10:33)

Christians should always be concerned for each other out of love (1 Cor 12:25)

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We should think of love as a debt to others and therefore never stop providing (Rom 13:8)

Love is complete and perfect (9-12)

Love is complete in that it can cover a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8)

Love never does harm (Rom 13:10)

Love should be rooted and grounded in God which makes it eternal (Eph 3:17, 19)

Love helps our maturity in God and is perfect when all things work as God desires (Eph 4:15-15)

Love binds into perfect unity (Col 3:14)

Greatness of love (13)

Loving God and others is the greatest commandment (Mark 12:29-31)

All of God's law is summed up in love (Gal 5:14)

God gives love through the power of His Holy Spirit therefore it is great (2 Tim 1:7)

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The Importance of Love in Relation to Spiritual Gifts (13:1-3)

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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

At the time of his death at age 56 in 2011, Steve Jobs's net worth exceeded \$10 billion. He was widely recognized not only as a leader in the technology industry but as a significant shaper of global culture. As the founder of Apple and then Pixar Animation, Jobs set new standards for innovation in consumer technology and corporate culture. Apple effectively created both the home computer and the desktop publishing industry, as well as Toy Story, the first fully computer-animated feature film. Jobs was also a major force in the development of streaming music and movies and touch-screen personal devices. Famous for bypassing market research, Jobs had an uncanny ability to intuitively sense what consumers would want, even before they realized they wanted it. While Steve Jobs was a uniquely gifted individual who has left an indelible mark on many aspects of global culture, his personal life was less successful. Jobs fathered a child at age 23 and spent the first seven years of her life denying paternity. Although he eventually accepted her into his family, she revealed in a 2018 memoir that Jobs was a difficult and demanding person to live with. Her testimony is consistent with numerous reports of Jobs's erratic behavior in the workplace. He fired people without notice or severance numerous times, famously asked inappropriate personal questions to prospective employees, and humiliated staff members by criticizing or even firing them publicly at meetings. Steve Jobs was a profoundly gifted person who left a huge mark on the world while damaging many people around him because he didn't act in love. Our lesson today reminds us that love is the essential ingredient to all kinds of success, most importantly, for living as godly people.

Corinth was a major city in ancient Greece. Paul spent 18 months in the city on his second missionary journey, despite much opposition there (Acts 18:1-17). Writing 1 Corinthians from Ephesus in about AD 56 while on his third missionary journey, Paul addressed a variety of issues and problems that had arisen in the Corinthian church in his absence. That church's many problems seemed to have been rooted in pride, which went hand in hand with airs of spiritual superiority. Some thought themselves to be superior because they identified with a particular leader (1 Corinthians 1-4). Some thought themselves to be exempt from moral expectations (1 Corinthians 5-7). Some thought themselves to be superior because of the foods they ate or refused to eat (1 Corinthians 8-10). Some thought that they were so superior to other Christians that they could neglect the needs of others (1 Corinthians 11). The issue of spiritual gifts was also a problem at Corinth in this context. Many individuals in the early church were empowered by the Spirit to accomplish important tasks, including miraculous manifestations such as prophecy (example: Acts 21:8-9) and speaking in tongues (example: 10:44-46). First Corinthians 12 begins a long section on the pride and arrogance that had entered the church through, ironically, the use of spiritual gifts. That discussion continues in chapter 14, but in the midst of it Paul pauses to offer a single, simple, concise answer to all the Corinthians' questions: love each other. Love, properly understood, will put everything else into perspective, unifying the church and empowering believers to glorify Christ together.

Key Verse: 1 Cor 13:13

13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

This chapter resembles praises of various virtues elsewhere in Greco-Roman literature; but that Paul chooses this particular virtue above all others is not dependent on his culture—love appears regularly as the supreme virtue in early Christian literature. As a brief digression between 1 Cor. 12:31 and 1 Cor. 14:1 (digressions were common in ancient literature), this chapter explains the way to evaluate which gifts are “greater.”

13:1. In some Jewish traditions, angels preferred to speak Hebrew, but most Jewish people would have agreed that angels understood human languages, especially since angels were appointed over various nations. Paul may believe that there are angelic languages in addition to human ones, in which case he would be saying, “Though I be so fluent in tongues that I could speak every conceivable language . . .” (Job’s daughters at the end of the Testament of Job spoke ecstatically in angelic tongues as they were inspired to think heavenly things; but it is not clear whether this text is pre-Pauline or was added by a tongues-speaking Christian in the second century.) Although cymbals were used in some pagan worship (as well as in Jewish worship), the point of Paul’s comparison is undoubtedly simply that, though loud, by themselves they communicate nothing (like some rhetoricians in his day). Corinth was famous for its “bronze,” and bronze vases (not “gongs,” as in most translations) were often used for amplifiers in the outdoor theaters of this period.

13:2-3. “Moving mountains” seems to have been a figure of speech for doing the impossible (cf. comment on Mark 11:23; cf. Zech. 4:7). Although a Roman reader could think of such stories as the suicide of the rejected lover Dido in a famous Roman epic, or self-burning by Indian philosophers, “giving one’s body to be burned” no doubt alludes instead to the standard Jewish tradition of martyrs, some of whom threw themselves into the fire to avoid being forcibly defiled.

13:4-7. The point of Paul’s rhetorically polished description of love is its contrast to what he has earlier said about the attitudes of the Corinthians. See comment on 1 Cor. 13:1-3.

13:8-13. As in 1 Cor. 13:1-3, Paul demonstrates here that love is a greater virtue than the gifts; in this case it is because love is eternal, whereas the gifts are temporary. Some Old Testament prophets predicted the outpouring of the Spirit in the final time, accompanied by ability to speak under the Spirit’s inspiration (Joel 2:28); but other prophecies noted that all the citizens of the world to come would know God, hence there would be no reason for exhortation (Jeremiah 31:33-34). Paul believes that the time of the Spirit’s gifts, including mere human knowledge, is the current time, between Jesus’ first and second comings (cf. 1 Cor. 13:10, 12). Mirrors (1 Cor. 13:12) were often made of bronze, and given the worldwide renown of Corinthian bronze, would perhaps strike the Corinthians as a local product (also 2 Cor. 3:18). But even the best mirrors reflected images imperfectly (some philosophers thus used mirrors as an analogy to describe mortals’ searching for the deity); contrast the more open revelation of Exodus 33:11, Numbers 12:8 and Deut. 34:10.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Priority of Love (13:1-3)

1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

2 And 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.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it

Seek the greater gift love (1)

Seeking love always is seeking the building up of others (1 Cor 8:1)

1 Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

In seeking, we must be willing to follow its way (1 Cor 14:1)

1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

We must try to excel in the gift of love so as to help others (1 Cor 14:12)

12 So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

Everything we do should be done in love (1 Cor 16:14)

14 Do everything in love.

Gifts without love (2)

Gifts without love can become a stumbling block to others (Rom 14:15)

15 If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

Gifts in themselves is nothing, only faith and love working through the gifts (Gal 5:6)

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Gifts are only effective if they are done out of a pure heart and good conscience toward God (1 Tim 1:5)

5 The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Giving without love (3)

Giving in the wrong way is mistreating God (Matt 25:45)

45 "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Giving without love is not edifying others (1 Cor 14:17)

17 You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

We must excel in love to excel in giving (2 Cor 8:7)

7 But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

One must give in love to please God (Phil 4:18)

18 I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

Practice and Description of Love (13:4-7)

4 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 rejoices in the truth;

7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love is humble (4)

Love as a servant and rely on the Holy Spirit for power (2 Cor 6:4, 6)

4 Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; 6 in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;

To be able to bear with others, it takes humility through love (Eph 4:2)

2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

As God's chosen people, Christians should be covered with humility and love (Col 3:12)

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Loving humility shows godly wisdom (James 3:17)

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Love is unselfish (5)

Love says to seek the good of others (1 Cor 10:24)

24 Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

Seek the good of others to aid in their salvation (1 Cor 10:33)

33 even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

Christians should always be concerned for each other out of love (1 Cor 12:25)

25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

To have the same attitude as Jesus is to love unselfishly (Phil 2:3-5)

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

If we don't show love to others, we don't have the love of God in us (1 John 3:16-17)

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

Love rejoices in truth (6)

Rejoicing in the truth is clinging to what is good (Rom 12:9)

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

Godly repentance leads to love and rejoicing in the truth (2 Cor 7:9-16)

9 yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. 10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. 12 So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. 13 By all this we are encouraged. In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. 14 I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well. 15 And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. 16 I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.

One of the most important things is that truth is spread (Phil 1:18)

18 But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,

Effective and faithful service out of love brings rejoicing (Phil 2:17-18)

17 But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. 18 So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Faithfulness to the truth brings joy and good reputations (3 John 3)

3 It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth.

Love is patient (7)

Show love through patience with the weak (Rom 15:1)

1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

Perseverance shows our trust and love of God (2 Thess 1:4-5)

4 Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. 5 All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering

Patience through love combats pride (Eccl 7:8)

8 The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride.

Follow the patience of biblical saints as examples (James 5:10-11)

10 Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Permanence of love (13:8-13)

8 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.

Love never fails (8)

It is the love of God that provides us hope that we can then pass on to others (Rom 5:5)

5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

It is God's love that really NEVER fails (Rom 8:35)

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

We should think of love as a debt to others and therefore never stop providing (Rom 13:8)

8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.

Love is complete and perfect (9-12)

Love is complete in that it can cover a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8)

8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

Love never does harm (Rom 13:10)

10 Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Love should be rooted and grounded in God which makes it eternal (Eph 3:17, 19)

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Love helps our maturity in God and is perfect when all things work as God desires (Eph 4:15-15)

15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Love binds into perfect unity (Col 3:14)

14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Greatness of love (13)

Loving God and others is the greatest commandment (Mark 12:29-31)

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

All of God's law is summed up in love (Gal 5:14)

14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

God gives love through the power of His Holy Spirit therefore it is great (2 Tim 1:7)

7 For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

Love proves we have been born of God (1 John 4:7-9)

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Importance of Love in Relation to Spiritual Gifts (13:1-3)

1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, **but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.** **2 And if I have the gift of prophecy,** and know all mysteries and all knowledge; **and if I have all faith,** so as to remove mountains, **but do not have love, I am nothing.** **3 And if I give** all my possessions to feed *the poor*, **and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.**

Before looking at each verse separately, several observations should be made concerning verses 1-3. The structure of verses 1-3 is very clear, setting these three verses apart from the rest of the chapter. Each verse begins with an "if," indicating Paul is speaking here of a hypothetical possibility. To press the hypothetical dimension even further, it seems clear that Paul is using hyperbole here. The statements Paul makes in all three verses hypothetically take a particular gift to its ultimate expression. In verses 1-3, Paul takes spiritual gifts to the Super Bowl. He seeks to demonstrate that *any gift, exercised to its highest level of performance, is of greatly diminished value if that gift is exercised without love.* In my opinion, Paul did not intend for us to assume that any of these hypothetical possibilities were even remotely possible.

Since some look to verse 1 to find a redefinition of the gift of tongues, this would not be the most forceful example of hyperbole. Let us look then to verse 2, where Paul speaks of faith that is able to remove mountains and of the gift of prophecy such that Paul can know all things. These words are written by the greatest apostle of all times. Few would dare to claim greater knowledge and revelation than Paul. And yet Paul goes on to say that we "**know in part, and we prophesy in part**" (verse 9). "**That which is perfect**"—knowing fully—will not come until Christ comes, and then we shall "**know fully**" (verse 12).

In verses 1-3, Paul speaks in the first person: "**If I ...**." There is not the accusatory "you" which there most certainly could have been. The gifts Paul selects are the greatest gifts, whether by the perception of the Corinthians (tongues), or in truth (prophecy, faith). It seems safe to say that all of the gifts Paul mentions in verses 1-3 are gifts Paul actually did possess and, to a degree, which far surpassed any of the Corinthian believers (see, for example, 14:18). Paul writes in the light of his own giftedness and points to the necessity of love for his gifts to be of benefit to others or to himself.

In these first three verses of chapter 13, a different time frame seems to be in view in each verse. In verse 1, Paul says, "**I have become ...**." In verse 2, he says, "**I am ...**." In verse 3, he writes, "**it profits me nothing.**" In verse 1, Paul seems to suggest that in living a loveless life, I become less than I was. The Corinthians are not the better for their lack of love; they are the worse. Worse yet, they are becoming something vastly inferior to what they once were. In verse 2, Paul speaks of a loveless saint in terms of his present state—"**I am nothing.**" In verse 3, Paul looks to future rewards for one's sacrificial service. Seemingly great acts of sacrifice may win man's approval, but they will not win us God's approval. Love is essential for eternal rewards.

Paul takes what are considered to be the greatest gifts anyone could possess, starting with tongues (the "ultimate gift" for the Corinthians), and grants that each could be exercised to the fullest possible extent. Even then, these spiritual gifts would be of limited value unless exercised out of a heart of love.

In verse 1, Paul first turns to the gift of tongues. Here is the gift at least some of the Corinthians prize most. Tongues is the ability to speak in unlearned earthly languages as seen in Acts 2. To the Corinthians, the ultimate in tongues was to be able to speak in a language which was not earthly. And so Paul grants the hypothetical

though unreal possibility that one could speak every human language, and even in the tongue of angels. But, Paul declares, if this were done apart from love, it would not be profitable to men: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Gongs and cymbals do have something in common, for they are at their best when employed in concert with other instruments. Cymbals are not "solo instruments"; they sound good only in the context of a musical piece along with many other instruments. I must confess, however, I played the trumpet probably because it was a solo instrument. I struggled to obtain first chair in band because I wanted to play the melody line and not a harmony part. Cymbals were not for me, because I wanted to be able to play alone and not be confined to a band or orchestra.

Can you imagine listening to a cymbal or a gong hour after hour? I actually can because one of our neighbors had a son who played the drums. Hour after agonizing hour we heard those drums pounding away, and, it was unpleasant, to say the least. Some instruments are not good alone. Rather than being enjoyable, they can be irritating. A tongues speaker without love could speak long and loud, enraptured by the sound of his own voice, but apart from interpretation, there would be no value to those who hear or even to the speaker (see 14:14-17). Exercised in love, and in accordance with the restrictions set down by Paul, tongues could be edifying. But without love, tongues would be irritating. I can just see brother or sister Jones standing up in the church meeting, as they did every meeting, and the whole church knowing what is about to happen. Eyes roll, and people silently mutter to themselves, "Oh, no, not again!"

What has been said in verse 1 in terms of the gift of tongues can be said for any other gift as well. Any gift exercised primarily for the benefit of the one who is gifted is a prostitution of that gift, and the end result of that kind of "ministry" is not edification but exasperation. *Love seeks to serve others to their benefit and at the sacrifice of the one who serves in love.* This kind of ministry blesses others. Self-serving, self-promoting ministry is a pain to others, something to be endured at best.

In verse 2, Paul turns to the two vitally important gifts of prophecy and faith. "And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."

In the first verse, the gift of tongues is selected by the apostle Paul. There he focuses on the benefit of the ultimate gift of tongues for others—when exercised without love. Now Paul turns to the gift of prophecy and its personal benefits to himself—if exercised apart from love. The gift of prophecy, as described here, is the ability to know mysteries and to gain knowledge. Prophecy is the divine ability to know what we would not be able to know apart from divine revelation. In the Bible, a mystery is a truth which is at least partially revealed, but which is not understood. According to Paul, the meaning of marriage was a mystery. Now we know that the truth about Christ's union with His church is illustrated by a Christian marriage (see Ephesians 5:22-33). Old Testament saints were saved by faith, and they worshiped God, but they did not think of themselves as one with God, through Jesus Christ. The union of Jews and Gentiles in the church was also a mystery in the Old Testament. Passages spoke of the Gentiles as recipients of divine grace, but no Jew fully understood the truth which Paul revealed in Ephesians 2. Gentiles and Jews are brought together in Christ as "**one new man**" (Ephesians 2:15-18).

Prophecy is the ability to receive knowledge from God by divine revelation, and it explains those matters which were formerly mysteries, even to the saints. Carried to its ultimate possibility, the gift of prophecy would enable one to know all knowledge and to understand every mystery. Even if this could be the case, such a gift of prophecy without love would contribute nothing to the one possessing the gift. The Corinthians wrongly measured their own significance by the gifts they possessed. Were this false assumption granted even for a moment, Paul shows that without love, the greatest gift, exercised to the fullest measure, really makes one a nobody.

Luke 7:36-50 illustrates this truth. There, everybody who was considered important seems to have gathered at the dinner Jesus attended at the home of Simon the Pharisee. A woman regarded as a "nobody" came, uninvited, and washed the feet of our Lord. Simon the Pharisee took note and, in his heart, thought less of Jesus because He allowed this woman to touch him. He thought, "If Jesus knew who she was and what a sinner she was, He would have nothing to do with her." But Jesus turned the tables. This woman went away forgiven and saved. She who was a "nobody" was a "somebody" in the kingdom of God, simply because she loved her Lord. The one who was least, but loved, was the greatest. Those who were the greatest, without love, were the least.

Do we not see the truth of verse 2 in the Old Testament? Look at Jonah, the prophet. He enjoyed the kind of "success" of which the prophet Elijah could only dream. Elijah wanted to convert a nation, the nation Israel. He "failed" because this was not God's purpose for him. So, too, Isaiah "failed" by secular standards of success. But when Jonah preached, the entire city of Nineveh repented. It was a success Jonah did not want. It was a

success that made Jonah angry with God. Who could leave the Book of Jonah liking this loveless prophet? He was nothing because he lacked love. Other prophets, like Balaam, also come to mind.

In addition to the gift of prophecy, Paul speaks of the gift of faith. Faith, exercised to the ultimate measure of success, would be a faith that could not only *move* mountains but *remove* them (compare Matthew 17:20; 21:21). If one had this kind of faith, yet lacked love, he would be a nobody. If I possess the greatest of gifts and exercise them to the fullest degree, yet without love, I am nobody. I am nothing. These words must have struck the Corinthians with considerable force.

In verse 3, Paul speaks of gifts in terms of the greatest imaginable sacrifice. “And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.” Quite frankly, I do not have a clue what gifts Paul refers to in verse 3, and I do not think it matters. He is surely speaking of great personal sacrifice, the appearance of which would gain one much favor and approval by his peers (compare Matthew 6:2-4). The ultimate sacrifice is made, either by giving up all of one’s possessions for the sake of the poor, or by the giving up of one’s life as a martyr. Because love is sacrificial (see Ephesians 5:25), some might be tempted to conclude that “great sacrifice” (giving up all one’s possessions or one’s life) was proof of great love.

Paul does not grant this assumption. People give away their possessions for any number of reasons, and many of those reasons can be self-serving rather than sacrificial. For example, I may leave all my wealth to a charitable organization, but I cannot take my money with me anyway. I might even do this to spite my children and deprive them of any inheritance. People have set themselves on fire, and I have yet to read of one instance in which love was clearly the motive. Ultimate sacrifices can be made apart from love, and if they are loveless, they are of no eternal benefit to the one making the sacrifice.

In verse 1, Paul speaks of the loveless exercise of the ultimate gift of tongues, showing that it would not edify others but irritate them. In verse 2, Paul speaks of the ultimate gifts of prophecy and faith, saying these gifts, exercised without love, leave one worthless. In verse 3, Paul speaks of the ultimate sacrifices made without love, showing that these sacrifices did not benefit the giver. However, others may benefit from my “loveless” sacrifices. The Ninevites were saved, whether Jonah loved them or not. They benefited from his ministry even though that surely was not his intention. The hungry may eat because I have given away all my possessions. But such acts of sacrifice do not really benefit me.

Benefits and blessings may occur through the loveless exercise of spiritual gifts, but these benefits are greatly reduced when love is lacking. And so in these first three verses of chapter 13, Paul shows the importance of love. The Corinthians are obsessed with the value of spiritual gifts, equating the social status of the gift with the significance of the one who possesses it. *Paul seeks to elevate love, the fruit of the Spirit, above the gifts of the Spirit.* Did the Corinthians think themselves spiritual because they possess seemingly important spiritual gifts? In verses 4-7, Paul shows that the measure of a man or woman of God is not determined by the gift(s) they possess, but by the love they practice in the exercise of those gifts.

Love Never Fails (13:8-13)

8 Love never fails; but if *there are gifts of prophecy*, they will be done away; if *there are tongues*, they will cease; if *there is knowledge*, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with 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 fully just as I also have been fully known. 13 But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul sets out to show the superiority of character to charisma; specifically, he wants us to grasp the superiority of Christian love to our possession of the gifts of the Spirit. In verses 1-3, Paul has stated that even the most highly prized gifts, exercised to the ultimate level of success, but without love, are of little value to the one who is gifted or to the one who is the recipient of his ministry. In verses 4-7, Paul describes love in a way which defines it in very practical terms and also shows the Corinthians’ lack of love. Now in verses 8-13, Paul adds his final, finishing touches on this chapter. He reasons that love is superior to all the spiritual gifts because love outlasts them. *Love never fails*; spiritual gifts do fail.

The statement, “**love never fails**,” nicely links Paul’s words in verse 7 with those which follow. Love “**never fails**” in that it *always* bears up, it *always* has faith, it *always* hopes, it *always* endures (verse 7). Furthermore, love “**never fails**” in the sense that it is eternal. That is what Paul is saying in verses 8-13.

The word “fail” is the translation of a word which literally means *to fall*. This same word is used to describe the fatal “fall” of the young man from the third story window while Paul was preaching (Acts 20:9). Ananias and Saphira both “**fell**” dead when confronted by Peter (Acts 5:5, 10). Paul employed this term when he spoke of

the 23,000 who “**fell**” dead in the wilderness due to their immorality (1 Corinthians 10:8; cf. Exodus 32:28). In other words, *love does not die; it does not come to an end*. I am reminded of the battery commercial that frequently runs on television. Love is like that battery that keeps on going and going and going ...

In contrast to love, which does not come to an end, Paul declares that spiritual gifts do come to an end; they *fail*. He writes of the demise of the three spiritual gifts considered most valuable by the Corinthians. Gifts of prophecy will be done away with; tongues will cease; knowledge will be done away (verse 8). Paul gives the reason for the “passing away” or the “failure” of the spiritual gifts in verses 9 and 10. Knowledge and prophecy in this age are partial and incomplete. But when “**the perfect**” comes, this will render the “imperfect”¹⁹³ obsolete.

The spare tire found in the trunk of many new cars may not be as big or as substantial as a full-sized tire, but when a flat occurs, that tire is more than adequate to get us back on the road for a limited period of time. That “imperfect” spare is taken off and put in the trunk as soon as a “perfect” tire is available.

Paul says that while love remains and does not *fail*, *all* the spiritual gifts (even the greatest ones) will fail. Some emphasize that certain so-called “temporary” gifts fail, yet they seem to gloss over that Paul is contrasting the *permanence* of love with the *temporary* nature of *all* the gifts—not just some of them. Often, the gift of tongues is singled out because of a subtle distinction in the Greek text. One Greek word is employed to refer to the passing of prophecy and knowledge, translated in the NASB by the expression “**done away**.” The cessation of tongues is depicted by a different term, rendered “**cease**” in the NASB. While the verb employed for the passing of prophecy and knowledge is passive in voice, the term used in reference to tongues is middle in voice. This subtlety is interpreted by some to mean that tongues will cease after the days of the apostles before the cessation of prophecy and knowledge. A. T. Robertson, the great Greek scholar of the past, writes of tongues, “They shall make themselves cease or automatically cease of themselves.”¹⁹⁴

All Christians should be knowledgeable and honest enough to say that the so-called “cessationist” position (certain gifts—especially tongues—came to an end at the close of the apostolic age) is based upon inferences rather than upon clear statements. It is one thing for the Bible to say tongues *will cease*; it is quite another to say tongues *have ceased*. It is my conviction that doctrine based upon clear, uncontradicted statements is to be held more dogmatically than doctrine based upon inference.¹⁹⁵ I too hold certain beliefs based upon inference, but I desire to acknowledge them as inferential. In 1 Corinthians 14:39, Paul pointedly prohibits us from forbidding others to speak in tongues. This is not an inference but a command. We dare not casually set aside biblical commands based upon inferential arguments.

My alma mater, Dallas Theological Seminary, teaches that 1 Corinthians 13:8 is proof that tongues were a temporary spiritual gift to be experienced only in the early days of the New Testament church but not today. When I applied to the Seminary, now nearly 30 years ago, a doctrinal statement was included along with the application form. Among other things, it declared that certain spiritual gifts like tongues and healing were temporary and were not to be experienced today. I signed that statement, with a small asterisk and a statement that, while I was not a charismatic Christian, I did not see how 1 Corinthians 13:8 proved the cessation of tongues. The Seminary graciously allowed me to attend in spite of my doubts concerning their cessationist position. I assumed further study would convince me that the Seminary’s position was iron-clad. This has not been the case.

Having indicated I do not embrace the cessationist position, I should further say I also believe God is not obliged to give the gift of tongues today either. It should be pointed out that there are certain vital and necessary functions in the church, for which there are accompanying general commands. All are commanded to give, to help, and to encourage. All may not be gifted in these areas, but it seems necessary that there be some who are thus gifted. All are not commanded to prophesy or to speak in tongues, and I believe there may be reasons for inferring that some gifts *may have ceased*. I must further state in clear terms that while I must grant the *possibility* of tongues, I do not grant the *necessity* of tongues, as is the practice of some Christians. Not all that is called *tongues* is biblical tongues, and much of what is practiced as tongues (whether genuine tongues or false) is not practiced as the Scriptures require.¹⁹⁶ In spite of this, a blanket rejection of the possibility of tongues cannot be biblically sustained in my opinion.

In verse 8, Paul shows love to be superior to all spiritual gifts in terms of permanence. Value can be measured in terms of how long something lasts. *Love lasts forever*; spiritual gifts do not. Now, in verses 9 and 10, Paul goes on to explain why spiritual gifts must be temporary. Spiritual gifts are not permanent because they are not perfect. Spiritual gifts are *partial*. *We know in part*, and we *prophesy in part*. Prophecy is never wrong or inaccurate; it is simply incomplete. Peter writes of the prophets of old, who spoke of the sufferings and glories of the Messiah who was yet to come and whose own writings puzzled them because they were incomplete (1 Peter 1:10-12). Paul was privileged to fill in some of the gaps of the Old Testament Scriptures by unveiling

certain mysteries (see Ephesians 3:1-13). Nevertheless, his revelations were partial. He did not reveal all that we would like to know. Because of this, his Epistles raised unanswered questions, and false teachers were quickly on hand to distort his writings (see 2 Peter 3:14-16).

The prophets of old were used of God to reveal all that God wanted us to know—but not all there is to know nor all that we would like to know. When “**the perfect**” comes, the imperfect will no longer be necessary. The imperfect will be done away with. I do not think that one can support the conclusion that “**the perfect**” which will come (13:10) is the completed canon of Scripture. The text seems to require that we must think of that which is perfect as the kingdom of God for which we eagerly wait. Only then will we know fully, just as we are now fully known (see verse 12).¹⁹⁷

I am writing this message on a computer, which, although not perfect, is vastly superior to the IBM Selectric typewriter on which I first typed my manuscripts. We sold that typewriter, so helpful in its day, at our last garage sale, quickly casting it aside for the powerful computer and laser printer now available. Just so, the prophetic word, so crucial in the days of our ignorance and spiritual blindness (see chapter 2), will be obsolete and unnecessary when our Lord comes to establish His kingdom, for then we shall see all things as they are.

In verses 11 and 12, by the use of an analogy, Paul puts spiritual gifts into perspective and indicates how we should view them. Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, and us, that we should view spiritual gifts as we do the toys of our childhood. Recently my wife Jeannette and I went to a friend’s home to celebrate one of their children’s fifth birthday. This lovely little girl joyfully opened a gift of several packages of “stickers,” those little stick-on things children love to attach to things. She also received some dolls and a play cash register. A few years from now, those gifts will hold little attraction in light of those adult “toys” which will come with future birthdays. Childish toys are great when we are children, but they should hold little attraction for adults.

Paul’s illustration teaches an important lesson to the Corinthians and also serves as a gentle rebuke for their pride and arrogance. Do they think they are wise? Of course, they do (see 4:6-21)! But their wisdom and understanding are partial. In the light of eternity, such knowledge will be set aside as imperfect. Do the Corinthians believe they see things clearly and that their perception of matters is accurate? Then let them know their knowledge is sketchy, especially compared with the perfect knowledge which is to be ours in eternity.

In verse 12, Paul likens our perception of truth and reality to looking into a mirror which only imperfectly reflects reality. This analogy loses some of its punch for us since mirrors today are so much better than those of Paul’s day. The mirror of Paul’s day was probably like the “mirrors” at a highway rest stop. Because glass mirrors are frequently smashed by vandals, many states use metal “mirrors” in their restrooms. One look into one of those mirrors will help us appreciate what Paul is saying, because it is impossible to see as clearly as you would like. The Corinthians did not see as clearly as they thought, either. At best, their knowledge was partial. They should not cling to their spiritual gifts with pride and think too highly of themselves. Rather, they should possess and appreciate all the gifts as temporary provisions of God, seeing them as partial and inferior to what eternity holds for us.

Paul goes one step further in verse 13, declaring that love is not only better than any or all of the spiritual gifts, but that it is even greater than faith and hope. Spiritual gifts *fail*, while love lasts. Faith, hope, and love all “**abide**” (verse 13). If love is greater than spiritual gifts which do not last, love is greater than faith and hope, which “**abides**” and “**endures**.” I am not certain just how Paul can speak of faith and hope as *abiding*, when they seem to be unnecessary in heaven. Faith, as written in the Epistle to the Hebrews, is “**the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen**” (11:1). Hope too seems to be temporal: “For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it” (Romans 8:24-25).

Since Paul does not trouble himself to explain, I suspect we should not agonize over this matter either. Certainly faith is necessary in reference to future things, things not presently seen. But does faith cease to exist when these things are seen? Will men cease to trust (to have faith) in God once in heaven? Will men cease to have hope in heaven? In the first year of eternity (speaking in terms of time), will we have no joyful anticipation for the years to come? Faith and hope, like love, may be appropriate for both time and eternity. Paul’s point here is to claim the superiority of love even over things as vital as faith and hope. He wants everyone to clearly understand that love is not something to look down upon as inferior to spiritual gifts and wisdom; rather, it is something of the greatest value.

Something of such great value must not only be esteemed, it should be sought. In His teaching, Jesus tells the parable of the “**pearl of great price**” (Matthew 13:45-46). When the merchant finds the one pearl of great value, he gladly sells all he has to purchase it. Paul tells us that love is that “**pearl of great price**.” It is the thing of great value. The Corinthians, knowingly or not, sacrificed love in their pursuit of certain spiritual gifts (see

chapter 8). Paul shows this to be contrary to eternal values, since love is the greatest. One does not wisely sacrifice that of the greatest value for something of lesser value.

The first verse of chapter 14 is Paul's "bottom line," the application he wants his readers to accept and accomplish. In saying love is the greatest, Paul is not belittling spiritual gifts. He merely seeks to put spiritual gifts into perspective. Spiritual gifts are a gracious provision of God, but they are never to be pursued or practiced at the expense of love. Love is to be pursued as the "**pearl of great price**," but the spiritual gifts are not to be neglected. *Love is the attitude of heart which adds value to the gifts.*

I must confess I have difficulties with a song quite popular among Christian artists and Christians at large. It is the song about the "old violin" which is being auctioned off. This "old violin" is about to be sold for a pittance when an old master takes it up and makes it play beautiful music. It is then sold for a great sum of money. Bad violins make bad music. Even good musicians don't make bad violins into good violins merely by playing them. To be accurate, the violin would have to be a "good violin" to demand a high price. In the hands of a novice, a good violin will sound horrible (I was once in high school band; I know!). In the hands of a gifted artist, a good violin will make beautiful music.

Spiritual gifts are like the violin. They are not bad; they are good. When employed by immature, carnal, self-seeking Christians, however, spiritual gifts produce an unpleasant sound (noisy and clanging?). When spiritual gifts are employed by spiritual Christians, *those who walk in love*, the gifts they exercise are beautiful; they are edifying to others. That is what Paul is trying to say. Love is one ingredient that can never be absent without being noticed. The Corinthians may profess to pursue and practice love, but they are surely lacking in love. And so this church, so marvelously gifted by God (see 1:7), falls desperately short of the mark. Paul's words in chapter 13 are intended to challenge us to give love its proper place and to pursue it in practice.

(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/what-thing-called-love-1-cor-131-13>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

From the perspective of the world, love is not an essential ingredient in the use of gifts. A large financial donation still helps the needy even if the donor gives the money simply to save on income taxes. A gifted teacher can lead a powerful lesson that changes lives, even if the teacher only wishes to draw attention to himself or herself. From God's perspective, these efforts are of no value to the individual who exercises the gift because their exercise is not done with the right motive. Central to the Christian understanding of God is that he is loving. This becomes "real" for us when we have a relationship with him. God is not a dispassionate Creator. The Lord God as revealed by Jesus is one who loves us in a personal way. God's love is not based on our deservedness. Love is the guiding force in everything that God does and must be the guiding force in the life of anyone who wishes truly to serve him. It's not optional.

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

Love Is Superior to Spiritual Gifts - Spiritual gifts are given individually to Christians so they can build up the Body of Christ while on earth. However, as important as these gifts are, Paul emphasized in 1 Corinthians 13 that all these gifts are worthless if used without love. You can speak in tongues, obtain divine insights, and provide miraculous signs, but all of these gifts are useless without love. What is most important is receiving God's love, loving Him, and loving others.

Love Is More Than a Sacrifice - Some may think becoming hungry in order to feed the poor, giving all your wealth to the less fortunate, or becoming a martyr is what God wants us to do. Those things God honors, if they are done with love.

What Love Does - Christians recognize what God's love is like and become His conduit to supply His compassion to a love-starved world. God's love is patient. He has the power to punish immediately, yet He waits, walking with people through life's challenges, extending grace and mercy. God's love is always looking out for the good of others.

What Love Does Not Do - People who say they are filled with God's love are not jealous and don't resent another's elevation. They are not continually looking for rewards and are not self-absorbed, easily irritated, or annoyed. They don't look for wrongs, but rights. Once Jesus returns, spiritual gifts will disappear, along with faith and hope. Finally, we will see Him face-to-face and have free, perfect fellowship with Him forever. The dim mirror we see Him through now will disappear; Jesus will be seen crystal clear. Everything God wanted to accomplish on earth will be achieved— love will be present fully and eternally.