



1 CORINTHIANS

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

INTRODUCTION

Many in the church at Corinth were exaggerating the importance of certain spiritual gifts such as tongues, prophecy, and knowledge, and the church was fracturing because of this. Those with these gifts deemed themselves more important than those who didn't, and those who didn't were tempted to feel useless and unimportant in the church. In chapter 12, Paul reminded them that God has given the church *numerous* gifts, and that all of them have a necessary role in building up the body of Christ. In chapter 13, he highlights the way in which our gifts are to be used.

MAIN POINT

Spiritual gifts are given to be used in love. Without love, they are worthless.

REFLECT

It's not too difficult to see why 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most well-known chapters in the Bible and why it is so often read at weddings. We all love to talk about love and will naturally gravitate to these verses that so poetically describe what love is.

But what Paul has in mind when he talks about "love" is a broader than romantic love (though such love certainly falls under the umbrella of what he's talking about). The love he has in mind is love that seeks to benefit others, even at great cost to oneself, regardless of whether it's deserved. It's the love that Jesus so perfectly embodied by coming into the world to live and die in the place of sinners so that they might be reconciled to God.

This chapter is a direct response to the Corinthians' wrong thinking regarding spiritual gifts. Those with more "impressive" gifts like tongues in prophecy were using their gifts

to inflate their own importance. But as Paul made clear in chapter 12, we've been given gifts by God to serve *others* rather than ourselves. Paul emphasizes this in 13:1-3 with some grandiose examples. Even if we speak in the tongues of angels, "understand *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge, and...have *all* faith" and "give away *all* we have" and yet love isn't present, all these things are worthless.

Why does Paul say this? Because it's possible to do all these things for ourselves rather than for others. For example, people might be impressed by me selling all I have to give to the poor, but not if they knew I was only doing it to impress them by my generosity. We can be the most eloquent, knowledgeable, and sacrificial person alive and be counted as nothing if we don't use these gifts to benefit others.

What love is and isn't is spelled out in verses 4-7, and again we see that biblical love is others-focused. Love is patient with and kind to others, endures their faults, gives them the benefit of the doubt, works to build up relationships, and is steadfast in the midst of difficulties. On the contrary, love that is self-focused is bitter about others' success and is proud, rude, selfish, irritable, and keeps a running record of how others have failed us. Paul's point is that this self-focused "love" is what lay behind the Corinthians' divisions, and the same is true of divisions in the church today.

To clinch his argument in this chapter, Paul appeals to common sense. Things that last forever are more important than things that don't. Spiritual gifts are important, sure, but they have an expiration date. We won't need the gift of knowledge or prophecy once we're actually face to face with Jesus himself. Love on the other hand, along with faith and hope, which will last forever, are infinitely more valuable than gifts. He's saying that instead of focusing so much on *what* gifts you have, focus on *how* you're using them to benefit others.

- How do you tend to define "love"? Has this chapter in any way challenged your definition?
- How does self-love tend to manifest itself in your life (irritability, jealousy, focusing on others' faults, etc.)?
- In light of this chapter, who are people in your life that you can love this week? How is God calling you to build them up?

MEMORIZE

1 Corinthians 13:13 – *"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."*