

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Chapter 13

The Way of Love

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. 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. 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 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 gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

13:1-8 Paul uses “all or nothing” rhetoric throughout this section. “He does not say that we have access to God by our love without Christ as the Atoning Sacrifice, that we receive the promised forgiveness of sins by our love. Paul says nothing about this. He does not, therefore, think that love justifies, because we are justified only when we receive Christ as the Atoning Sacrifice and believe that for Christ’s sake God is reconciled to us” (Ap V 101). (TLSB)

13:1–3 *tongues ... prophecy ... faith ... give*. Paul selects four gifts as examples. He declares that even their most spectacular manifestations mean nothing unless motivated by love. (CSB)

13:1 *tongues of men and of angels*. Paul uses hyperbole. Even if he could speak not only the various languages that human beings speak but even the languages used by angels—if he did not speak in love, it would be nothing but noise. (CSB)

By “the tongues of humans” he does not mean the created capacity to learn other languages; he means the supernatural gift of speaking foreign languages as exercised in Corinth, a gift which Paul himself was richly endowed (14:18). (CC p. 458-459)

Because Hbr was the language of the temple prayers, rabbis came to regard it as the language of the angels. (TLSB)

love. The Greek for this word indicates a selfless concern for the welfare of others that is not called forth by any quality of lovable-ness in the person loved, but is the product of a will to love in obedience to God’s command. It is like Christ’s love manifested on the cross (cf. Jn 13:34–35; 1Jn 3:16). (CSB)

Note the Greek word order, which gives prominence to the word *agape*. The word is rare in classical and Hellenistic Greek literature. Occurring nineteen times in the LXX, it is used most frequently of a lover’s desire for his or her beloved (eleven times in the Song of Solomon) and

may denote a sensual love like Ammon's love for Tamar (2 Sam 13:15). Only in the NT does agape take on its specific Christian coloration as that self-sacrificing love for one another which is inspired by God's love for us in Christ (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). (CC p. 457)

noisy gong – Even the possession of this gift to the highest degree would be a sham if it were not accompanied by love. A loveless tongues-speaker is no better than a noisy brass (gong) or a clashing cymbal – not melodious but monotonous and annoying to the ear. Corinth was noted for its bronze. Paul may have in mind bronze cases used as amplifiers in theatres. The clash of cymbals would have been familiar to the Corinthians from the frenzied worship associated with the cults of Dionysus and Cybele. (CC pp. 459-460)

Not melodious, but annoying. Devotees of Dionysus and Cybele clashed cymbals during frenzied worship. Corinthian brass works likely made such cymbals. (TLSB)

13:2 prophetic powers – Again, Paul was second to none in receiving revelations from God and his insight into divine mysteries. But if he or anyone else should claim the gift of prophecy, even to the nth degree, but fail to exercise it in love, he would be worthless. (CC p. 460)

Lit, "prophecy," which could describe the office. (TLSB)

all mysteries and all knowledge. Again Paul uses hyperbole to express the amount of understanding possessed. Even if one's gift is unlimited knowledge, if one does not possess and exercise that knowledge in love, he is nothing. (CSB)

faith so as to remove mountains. A special capacity to trust God to meet outstanding needs. Again Paul uses hyperbole. (CSB)

Jesus had said: "If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain 'Move from here to there,' and it will move" (Mt 17:20). In an unmistakable echo of his Master's words, Paul asserts that even if he were filled with enough faith to move mountains but lacked love, he would amount to nothing. His gift would fail to build up the church. (CC p. 460)

I am nothing – Without love, office and service bring neither good nor honor. (TLSB)

13:3 give away all I have – Paul adds that if he were to follow the example of many early Christians by parceling out his possessions to the poor (Acts 2:45; 4:32), he would still reap no spiritual benefit as long as his actions were not motivated by love. In fact, he would be no better than Ananias and Sapphira, whose behavior was prompted solely by selfish considerations (Acts 5:1-11; cf Mt 6:2). (CC pp. 460-461)

Like breaking away bits of bread until the entire loaf is gone. (TLSB)

give up body to be burned. A reference to suffering martyrdom through burning at the stake, as many early Christians experienced. Even the supreme sacrifice, if not motivated by love, accomplishes nothing. (CSB)

An early variant refers to giving the body up for "boasting" rather than "burning." In all cases, willing martyrdom is meant. (TLSB)

Paul was enduring all kinds of bodily sufferings for the sake of the Gospel, and rather than boasting in his great spiritual accomplishments and visions, he was resolved to boast only in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31) and in his weaknesses (2 Cor 11:18-30; 12:9). But he knew that “without love all reason for glorying, even the greatest, is profitless. (CC p. 461)

I gain nothing – Without love, goodness and honor are never gained. “We are to keep the Law when we have been justified by faith, and so grow in fulfilling the Law more and more <by the Spirit>” (Ap V 3). (TLSB)

13:4–7 Love is now described both positively and negatively. (CSB)

Poetically balanced between negative and positive statements. Fifteen assertions describe the nature of love in Christ: two positive statements, eight negative statements (the last one adds a positive contrast), then four positive statements. The first assertions are most important (“patient,” “kind”; God’s attributes, and are further defined by the assertions that follow. (TLSB)

This section uses fifteen verbs to describe the qualities of Christian love. The first two verbs give a positive description of love’s greatest qualities. They are followed by a series of eight negated verbs which express what love is not. The final four verbs are positive again, each being preceded in Greek by *panta*, “all things.” (CC pp. 463-464)

Whereas English translations generally resort to adjectives in translating many of these verbs, the Greek has a dynamic quality well suited to the way love expresses itself in actions for the benefits of others. (CC p. 464)

13:4 is patient – In contrast to the feverish emotionalism of the heathen cults (12:2), Christian love is marked not so much in the expressions as in the extension of emotion. The Christian is not short-tempered, but longsuffering with others. In this he imitates God, who has always displayed longsuffering in His dealings with His people. Paul was deeply conscious of how much he owed to the perfect patience Christ Jesus had shown in his case (1 Tim 1:16). God’s longsuffering with His people is to be reflected, then, in the longsuffering Christians are to show one another. Such longsuffering does not come naturally, nor may it be produced by “an arbitrary cultivation of the virtue of self-control. It is a gift from God, a fruit of God’s Spirit (Gal 5:22). (CC p. 464)

Patience (long-suffering) plays a significant role in the OT, where the formula of Ex 34:6 (“the Lord God is compassionate and merciful, longsuffering...”) echoes again and again through the biblical writings. To say that God is longsuffering, “long-tempered” rather than short-tempered, he reflects and imitates God (Rom 2:4; 9:22) and the example of Jesus (see Mt 11:29). Instead of expecting instant results, he is able to wait patiently for the Lord’s coming, like the farmer patiently waiting for the rain (James 5:7-8; cf Lk 18:7). Such is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). (CC p. 462)

2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

kind – Again it is God who sets the example by showing unfailing kindness in the creation, preservation, and redemption of His people. His kindness to them should bear fruit in their lives. (Gal 5:22; Col. 3:12). (CC p. 464)

does not envy – Having shown love’s most important positive characteristics, Paul throws love into sharper relief by showing what it is not. The Corinthians had fallen prey to jealousy through their competitiveness and warring factions (1:10-11; 3:3). “You have not been walking the way of love,” Paul reminds them. Jealousy is the green-eyed monsters which is never content with the gifts it has received, but must be eyeing what other have (Mt 20:15), even trampling over others for advancement and preferment. It is one of “the works of the flesh” Gal 5:19-21) which make war on the new Spirit-filled life within the body of Christ. (CC pp. 464-465)

or boast – Love also does not behave like a braggart or windbag. Apparently some of the Corinthians, with their delight in eloquent and impressive speech, had fallen into that trap. Paul had to educate them about the world’s false wisdom, and eloquence; the world’s wisdom in foolishness to God (1:17-24; 3:19), and Paul deliberately avoided superficial eloquence in his presentation of the Gospel (2:1-7, 13; 4:19-20). (CC p. 465)

not arrogant. Nor does love condone the closely related sin of being inflated with self-importance (is not puffed up). A number of times Paul has had occasion to chide the Corinthians for being puffed up (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1) because of factional pride and arrogance, for their toleration of immorality, and for their disregard for his directives as a called apostle of God. Now he points out that ballooned, inflated egos are totally incompatible with Christian love. Egoism fractures the unity of the body of Christ. (CC p 465)

13:5 *not rude*. Perhaps an indirect reference to their unruly conduct in worship (11:18–22). (CSB)

It is concerned for what is right in the Lord’s sight and also takes care not to offend others. Paul often calls on Christians to conduct themselves in a proper and dignified fashion in various aspects of their lives – their conduct toward the opposite sex (1 Cor 7:35); in the conduct during worship (14:40); and in proper and responsible ethical conduct in general (Rom 13:13; 1 Thess 4:12). (CC p. 465)

does not insist on its own way – Paul had admonished the Christian in Corinth not to be self-seeking and not to do everything that may be permissible, but to seek the edification of others (10:23-24). Thus they would be imitating his example of not seeking his own benefit but the salvation of many (10:33). Later Paul commends Timothy to the Philippians for his unparalleled unselfishness: “I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:20-21; cf Phil 2:4). (CC p. 465)

not irritable – Paul himself had become provoked during an argument with Barnabas about whether or no to take John Mark along on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:39). He may have come to regret his impatience on that occasion, for Mark proved a valuable church servant (2 Tim 2:20-21; 4:11). More important, however, than any personal regrets on Paul’s part was the widespread tension in the Corinthian congregation, where the factional rivalry had led to a great deal of provocation. His admonition here is in line with his general concern that Christians control their anger (Eph 4:26, 31-32). (CC p. 466)

resentful – In so doing, it follows the Lord of love, who did not keep a record of a record of people’s sins, not even of those who crucified Him (Lk 23:34). Our Lord erases the sins of His people from His ledger (Rom 4:8; Col 2:14) so that He remembers them no more (Jer 31:34; Heb 8:12). Love carries “no chip on its shoulder.” It does not nurse a grudge. It forgives, even as Christ has forgiven (Eph 4:32) (CC p. 466)

13:6 *does not rejoice at wrongdoing.* As they were doing in ch. 5. (CSB)

Love avoids the human propensity not only to give tacit approval to wickedness but even to delight in hearing about it and perpetuating it (cf Acts 8:1; Rom 1:18, 32; 6:13). Here unrighteousness is contrasted not with righteousness but (as often in the NT) with truth. While unrighteousness suppresses the truth (Rom 1:18), God's righteousness is displayed in the truth of the Gospel (Rom 1:16-17; Gal 2:5, 14). (CC p. 466)

13:7 *bears all things* – Paul and his co-workers put up with hard work and deprivation for the sake of the Gospel (9:12). (CC p. 467)

Protects has a range of meanings including “cover,” “conceal,” “protect,” “hold back,” “hide,” “bear,” “endure,” “persist.” Its cognate noun mean “a roof” (Mt 8:6; Mk 2:4; Lk 7:6). (CC p. 463)

believes – To say that love believes, has faith through all things does not mean love is gullible and always believes other people. Rather, faith generated by God's love in Christ perdures in all circumstances. (CC p. 467)

hopes all things – Love never gives up hope in God. The same theme is found in 1 Thessalonians, where Paul thanks God for the church's “endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:3). (CC p. 467)

endures all things – Endurance is one of the great characteristics of life under the cross in Christ's kingdom (Rev. 1:9) The verb endures is a close synonym to be longsuffering at the beginning of 1 Cor 13:4, nearly rounding off the paragraph. (CC p. 467)

13:8 *love never ends* – Piptei – To fall or come to an end. Love never does this.

Paul introduces another contrast to show love's superiority. (TLSB)

Just as the Word of God never falls to the ground ineffective but always accomplishes its purposes (Is 55:10-11), so Christian love will retain its honored place throughout time and eternity. (CC p. 470)

prophecies ... will pass;... tongues ... will cease;... knowledge ... will pass away. These three will cease because they are partial in nature (v. 9) and will be unnecessary when what is complete has come (v. 10). (CSB)

The same verb (*katargeo*) is repeated in different forms. The offices/gifts craved by the Corinthians are bound to the present era and will not be needed in eternity. (TLSB)

In 1:28 Paul used the verb *kataryeo* to describe how God abolishes or reduces to nothing “the things that exist,” namely, the world's wisdom and power. Here in 13:8 and 13:10 the verb has the sense to “supersede.” The difference between 1:28 and 13:8, 10 is that the things to be abolished in 1:28 are evil, but the things in 13:8, 10 are good but will give sway to greater realities. (CC p. 468)

If the Corinthians would only stay focused on the things that endure, eagerly anticipating the revelation of their Lord Jesus Christ (1:7) and the resurrection of the dead (15:1-58), then from

that eternal perspective they would see that even the greatest spiritual gifts lack permanent value. (CC pp. 470-471)

13:9 we know in part – God has not revealed everything we could know or that could be revealed through ongoing prophecy. For life now, God insists that we live by faith. (TLSB)

This does not mean that the knowledge provided by divine revelation is false, distorted, or imperfect. Jesus assured His disciples that by continuing in the Word they would know the truth, and the truth would make them free (Jn 8:31-32). His words are words of eternal life (Jn 6:68). But while the knowledge we have is liberating and life-giving, it is still only partial. Our darkened minds find it difficult to comprehend God’s truths. And His Word still provides only glimpses of what will be fully revealed in eternity, when we will see “face to face” (1 Cor 13:12). (CC p. 471)

13:10 *perfection*. The Greek for this word can mean “end,” “fulfillment,” “completeness” or “maturity.” In this context the contrast is between the partial and the complete. Some refer the verse to the return of Christ, others to the death of the Christian, others to the maturity (or establishment) of the church, still others to the completion of the canon of NT Scripture. Verse 12, however, seems to indicate that Paul is here speaking of Christ’s second coming. (CSB)

Gk *teleios*, “something or someone complete.” The fullness and completeness that will appear with Christ’s return. He is perfect and is the One who makes perfect (Heb 12:2). “At that time there will be no more forgiveness, but only perfectly pure and holy people” (LC II 58). (TLSB)

13:11 *a child* – *Napios* – A very young child or infant. (QV)

Childhood is “imperfect” and incomplete because the mind and body are designed to strive for maturity. (TLSB)

Certain patterns of speech and of thinking and reasoning are appropriate for a child, and children cannot transcend the natural limitation imposed on them by their immaturity. But as they develop into adults, they become capable of more mature cognitive activity. Their former ways are no longer appropriate once they have grown up. (CC p. 471)

13:12 *we see in a mirror dimly*. The imagery is of a polished metal (probably bronze) mirror in which one could receive only an imperfect reflection (cf. Jas 1:23)—in contrast to seeing the Lord directly and clearly in heaven. (CSB)

Made from polished brass. Archaeologists have found such mirrors at Corinth. *dimly*. Lit, “in a riddle.” The knowledge is indirect and, therefore, imperfect. (TLSB)

Ainigma (poor reflection) comes from the Greek word for “riddle,” We can hear our English word enigmatic in it . (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 2, Part 1)

During our life in this age, we live by faith in the revelation we have been given through God’s Word, and we do not yet behold God directly, by sight. This may be compared to looking in a mirror: what we see is only a reflection of the real thing. Paul is not implying that the mirrors of his day provided only “a poor reflection” or distorted the image so that it was inaccurate. The argument that ancient mirrors were of poor quality, providing only a flawed image, cannot be sustained. Indeed, Corinth was known for the fine quality of its bronze mirrors. Rather, Paul is comparing the indirect nature of viewing a face in the mirror with seeing someone face to face.

An apt modern comparison is between seeing a person in a photograph or on television or in a movie verse seeing the person himself. In eternity we will see God “face to face.” Just as the Israelites – with a few significant exceptions, such as Moses (Num 12:8) – could look on God’s face and live (see also Gen 32:30; Judg 13:22-23), neither can the Christian in this life look on the full glory of God and live. That privilege is reserved for the next life. Thus our knowledge of God in this life can only be incomplete. (CC pp 471-472)

face to face – In God’s immediate presence (cf Ex 33:11; Dt 34:10), where He is not “hidden” by our present limitations. (TLSB)

know in part...know fully. The Christian will know the Lord to the fullest extent possible for a finite being, similar to the way the Lord knows the Christian fully and infinitely. This will not be true until the Lord returns. (CSB)

Perfecting our knowledge in God’s presence. The believer will not simply know about God but will have direct, personal experience of Him. *fully known*. God is all-knowing and already knows us fully. (TLSB)

The passive epegnosthan stresses once again that the love and knowledge Christians have are the result of being loved and known by God. It’s all sheer grace. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 2, Part 1)

Switching back to the first person singular, Paul speaks in a personal way of what this heavenly prospect means for him. Now the apostle’s knowledge of God and of divine things is only partial (13:12 as in 13:9). But then his knowledge will be complete, just as God’s knowledge of him is complete. And God’s intimate knowledge of Paul is bound up in his divine love and care for him. One may compare 1 Cor 13:12 to John 10:14-15, where the Good Shepherd’s knowledge of His sheep is connected with His self-sacrificing love for them (cf Ps 1:6, where the Lord’s knowledge of the way of the righteous implies His person care as he leads them to life eternal; see also Ps 23:1,6). (CC p. 472)

13:13 *abide*. Now and forever. (CSB)

faith, hope and love. A summary of Christian virtues. (TLSB)

Faith in the God who knew and loved His people before they were born (1 Cor 13:12; cf Gal 1:15), hope in Him, and the love which flows from faith and hope – these “theological virtues” have supreme and enduring value for the lives of all Christians, regardless of the spiritual endowment any individual may possess. They are the believer’s enduring character marks. (CC p. 472)

Paul does not mean, however, that these “virtues” in their present form will all abide eternally. Elsewhere he contrasts “faith,” which marks the Christian’s walk in this aeon, with the “sight” which will be granted in the age to come (2 Cor 5:7). Moreover, he will write to the Romans: “Hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he sees? (Rom 8:24). Faith and hope, then pertain to this temporary aeon, which “is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31) (CC pp. 472-473)

the greatest of these is love. Because God is love (1Jn 4:8) and has communicated his love to us (1Jn 4:10) and commands us to love one another (Jn 13:34–35). Love supersedes the gifts because it outlasts them all. Long after these sought-after gifts are no longer necessary, love will

still be the governing principle that controls all that God and his redeemed people are and do. (CSB)

“Faith” and “hope” are by nature imperfect, because they mature into “knowledge” when the thing believed in or hoped for is reached. Love does not turn into something else but, when mature, remains love. “Paul, in this passage, properly speaks about love toward one’s neighbor and indicates that love is the greatest, because it has the most fruit. Faith and hope have to do only with God. But love has infinite offices outwardly toward humanity” (Ap V 105). “Faith is never alone, but always has love and hope with it” (FC Ep III 11). (TLSB)

The loving relationship between the God who is love and His people will endure throughout eternity; indeed, in eternity it will become most palpable. This will not only be true of the love between God and His people, It will also, in an almost unimaginable fashion, be true of the relationships that God’s people have with each other. Our love for each other will be perfect, because it will flow out from God’s perfect love toward us. (CC p. 473)

But the eternally enduring nature of love is by no means the only reason why Paul calls it “the greatest.” Clearly Paul is also praising love because of its inestimable value to the church. The whole aim of his apostolic charge was to produce the love that flowed “from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5). Nowhere was a church in greater need of this highest of virtues than the strife-torn congregation in Corinth. (CC p. 473)

To have Christian love is to be most like God. God is not called faith or hope directly, He is called love. “God is love” (1 John 4:16) Without love we cannot understand God or what it means to be a Christian. (PBC)

Ch 13 By so completely describing and advocating love’s divine qualities, Paul reveals the Corinthians’ immaturity. He sharply rebukes all noisy, clanging boasts of superiority. Yet, he alludes to the fact that the Father—who knows His children all too well—still loves them, reaches for them by His Word, and will embrace them eternally because of Christ, who delivered Himself up for us all. • O Father, all-knowing, when my brothers and sisters disappoint and annoy me, take my hands and stretch them wide to embrace them with Your all-embracing love; through Jesus, our mutual Savior. Amen. (TLSB)