

1 Corinthians 13

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- [0 : 00] My name's Robert, and I have the privilege of serving as the university minister at Holy Trinity Church. And it is also my privilege tonight to open up 1 Corinthians 13, so if you want to find that in your Bible, keep your finger there.
- That's where we will be spending our time. I have to admit, I've been waiting a long time to preach this passage. It has been, I think, 12 years now since I sat in the living room of Stephen Carroll Ehrenholz at an HTC training event, and I started to come to terms with the idea that I had not really understood this passage my entire life.
- An old British man named Dick Lucas showed us how to read the passage and convinced us we had all been wrong about it. So, I'm a little excited, because this was a formative moment for me.
- This was actually right at the time that I sort of committed to studying the Bible and going into pastoral ministry with my life. So, let's get started.
- Actually, first, let me pray. Great God in heaven, purify my heart, cleanse my lips, that your voice may be heard.
- [1 : 25] Give us your spirit that we may understand your word and love and do your will to your glory. Amen. It's the love chapter.
- You've heard this chapter a few times, I'm sure, right? It's a common passage. It's recited at countless weddings. And as I learned earlier this week when I was searching it online, it is in a shocking number of parental advice blogs.
- Don't even get me started on the sheer amount of junk on which you can have these verses embroidered, stitched, or knitted on Etsy.
- It's, yeah. I can't believe that the National Opinion Research Center, the Pew Forum, hasn't done some kind of statistical study on this, but I have to believe, based on my extensive Google searching, that it is got to be in the top three most popular passages in the English Bible, you know, that are known by English-speaking peoples.
- Maybe behind, like, John 3.16 and judge not lest ye be judged, or whatever that verse is. Yeah.
- [2 : 48] It's a common passage, isn't it? But as I also found out in my Google searching, it's a commonly abused passage. It is quite frequently ripped from its context.
- Now, I'm sympathetic about that. I mean, the word love is used here nine times in 13 verses, so it's pretty clear what Paul's getting at.
- It's pretty clear what's on his mind. And it's very tempting, I think, to bring our sort of preconceived notions of love to this passage and then walk away thinking, hey, we know what Paul was doing there.
- That makes sense. I'm not sure that's the best way to read this. So, tonight I want to make sure that we read it in its context and that we get a handle on its tone.
- I think the passage works like this. Verses 1 through 3 address an absence of love. Verses 4 to 7 give an accounting of love.

- [3 : 52] And verses 8 through 13 encourage an aspiration for love. So, again, you know, because in order to qualify as a proper sermon, it has to be exactly three points in alliterative. So, love. An absence. An accounting. And an aspiration. One to three.
- If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.
- If I give all that I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. So, you may remember from last week, we are in a stretch of three chapters here, addressing a question that the Corinthian church had written to Paul about, and it was a question of spiritual gifts.
- We saw last week that there are a variety of gifts in chapter 12, and that this variety is necessary. But this necessary variety should never be divisive.
- [5 : 12] It should never divide the Christians in a church. So, Christians should never feel inferior or ashamed about having particular gifts, but neither should they feel superior about having particular gifts.
- And you may remember also, in the last verse of chapter 12, that he promised that he would show us a still more excellent way. And so, we see from the opening here, verses 1 through 3, that he's still very much on the subject of spiritual gifts.
- You'll notice he mentions tongues, prophetic powers, knowledge or understanding, and faith in the first two verses.
- Those are all things that appeared on his list of spiritual gifts in chapter 12. But to each of these, he has added a requirement. Love.
- It's the missing ingredient. Now, he hasn't defined it yet, but he makes the case that spiritual gifts, without it, are at best annoying, like cymbals and gongs going off, or worthless, or unproductive.
- [6 : 28] So, at this point, if the goal is simply this logical argument to elevate the necessity of love, then his argument makes sense.
- The real punches come with the next section. Four to nine. Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast.
- It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.
- Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. You know, that actually should be verses four to seven. There are two simultaneous arguments here.
- The first is a positive definition of love as patient, kind, trusting, hopeful, enduring. And this love certainly is. It absolutely should be that way in marriage, in a parenting relationship, and in a church family.
- [7 : 36] Yet, despite the impression left at most sentimental readings of this at weddings, this passage, this is not referring only to romantic love. Now, it's probably a little cliché here to get into this, but in the Greek language, there are four different words for love.
- One of them is agape, which is the word being used here, and it's quite a broad word. It includes a sense of devotion, of loyalty, of service, and a self-sacrificial posture toward others.
- The King James Version of the Bible actually translates this word as charity, which I think has some advantages. Paul says in Romans 5, verse 8, that God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.
- Earlier in our letter, in 1 Corinthians 4, 21, Paul asks the Corinthians how they would like him to arrive, ready to rebuke or to comment when it's time for him to come for a visit.

He says, what do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness? He also ties this word love to the notion of church members building each other up in chapter 8, verse 1.

[8 : 58] Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Notice there that he even brings into contrast a spiritual gift that he's talking about in chapter 12, this gift of knowledge.

Remember, the Corinthians have all knowledge back in chapter 1. And the tone in 12 when he actually gets to talking about the gift of knowledge is one of, oh, Corinthians, I know you think you know everything, but I really don't want you to be, you know, uninformed or ignorant or without knowledge.

And so, the tone here, I think, is one of rebuke. But the second simultaneous argument, I think, makes it even clearer.

And that's the negative definition of love. It is not envious. It doesn't boast. It's not arrogant. It's not rude.

It's not insistent on its own way. Irritable or resentful. Of course, Paul's actually already mentioned some of these ideas. Love is not rude.

[10 : 15] Take a look back at 735. He says, I hope some of you, I hope none of you, rather, are behaving rudely toward your fiancés.

Okay. Love does not insist on its own way. Look back at 1024. He says, don't insist on your own way, Corinthians, but look out for the good of your neighbor.

Love is not arrogant. But guess what? The Corinthians are. Look back at 4.6, 4.18-19, and especially chapter 5, verse 2.

He says, he finishes this tirade with, and you are arrogant! Exclamation point. He yells at them.

The idea here in chapter 13 is, whatever love is, Corinthians, it's not you. It's very much a tone of rebuke.

[11 : 19] And I don't think there's any young couple in Corinth who came to church and listened to this letter read and thought, yeah, that bit in the middle, that poem about love, that's what I want read at my wedding.

No, it's not. This passage carries such a sharp sting. Love is not you, Corinth. You've missed it on love.

But of course, Paul doesn't leave it there. He calms down, he encourages them, and he encourages them toward a particular aspiration for love.

8 to 13. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease.

As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

[12 : 30] But when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 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.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love. There will come a point, he says, when all of these spiritual gifts, which you are so fascinated by here in Corinth, they will be gone.

They will be unnecessary. Faith will not be required because we will be face to face with Christ Jesus himself. Knowledge will not be necessary.

Tongues will cease. He says, we will be singing together the praises of God in the new heaven, in the new earth. Prophecy will be finished because eternity will have arrived.

But even then, how we act toward one another, the love we show one another, it will still matter. Love will persist beyond the return of Jesus Christ, Christ.

[13 : 42] And so, there is hope for the Corinthians, and I think for us, that we may begin to practice love. Paul uses two metaphors to demonstrate this.

The first is the idea that he used to be a child and so behaved like a child and then he grew up. It's actually, I think, an especially poignant metaphor because of the way he introduced this metaphor back in chapter 3 when he told the Corinthians they were spiritual infants.

It's the same word. He's saying that they are on the path of growing up. If they embrace this missing ingredient of love, they will grow up.

They will put the childish ways of thinking they know everything and putting down those whose gifts aren't as cool or as popular behind them. rather, they will practice these gifts with love because love abides forever.

The second metaphor compares the difference between seeing a face in a dimly lit mirror and seeing face-to-face that difference with the realization of perfect love.

[14 : 57] In other words, when Christ returns, we will see clearly and from a vantage point of maturity. We will no longer need the spiritual gifts. Rather, perfection will be known directly and it will be wrapped in these virtues.

Faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love. I think there are probably two lessons here for us, at least two.

The first is to take Paul's rebuke seriously and to measure our attitudes toward each other accordingly. Is there anything about the way we act toward one another?

The posture we take in conversation or even in the privacy of our own minds that could be considered unloving? Do we put ourselves, our own comfort, our own desires, and our own ideas first?

Have we adopted the unloving views of either arrogant cessationism or abusive hyper-charismaticism or monocraticism from last week? Do we look down on others in this church?

[16 : 11] Is this a rebuke that we should be stung by? I mean, I think it's worth thinking about. Do we need to grow up? The second lesson is, I think, the other side of that coin.

Love is a lot of things in this chapter. And I think Jesus is the epitome of all of them. He is the very definition of self-sacrificial, kind, patient, bearing all things and humbly not insisting on his own way love.

And I think nowhere is this clearer than in the cross. The verse I mentioned earlier, Romans 5, 8, I think, really captures this.

In the act of dying on the cross, Jesus not only atones for our sins and saves us, but he both makes it possible for us to love one another in a way that honors God and shows us how to love one another to the very end because love will endure.

God shows his love. This is Romans 5, 8. God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Our reception of his gift of sacrificial love enables us and becomes our model for sacrificially loving others.

[17 : 34] These two ideas are always intertwined. So practically, don't think just about how because we're very good at thinking about how, but actually get out there and get to the hard and glorious time-consuming work of loving each other.

Write an email to a friend. Honestly, build them up. Give somebody a ride to the airport. Pray for somebody. Visit them in the hospital. Send them a gift.

Tell them thank you. Carry their groceries. I mean, I get that we're all pressed for time. We have our own things to do. But maybe just take a single person and think about one way this week that you can show love to them.

I mean, compared with dying on a cross, it really is the very least we can do, right? Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, teach us to love one another with truth and grace. as a body of worshipers, help us to see that however we use our gifts, it should be done so out of and with love, the very love you have shown us to your glory.

[19 : 11] Pray this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.