

Devotion: Love Better than Gifts

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Date: 27 February 2025

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[0 : 00] All right, we're coming back to 1 Corinthians. We're going to be in chapter 13 today. This is dealing with the spiritual gifts because chapter 12, 13, 14 is a unit.

Last time that we were together, we talked about the spiritual gifts. And a couple of things about them that we need to just talk about first before we get into all of this is that we looked at Paul was basically in chapter 12 giving us what seems to be the nature of the spiritual gifts.

He talks about how they're Christ-centered, that no one who speaks can ever say Jesus is accursed. He talked about how they are for an expression of unity, right?

There's this unity of the triune God that the same gift and manifestation of power come from the Spirit, God, and the Lord. And so you get this Trinitarian unity in the working of the gifts.

But also, he uses that huge illustration in chapter 12 about how the body has many members and each member is a vital part of the body. And the other thing is that he seems to connect that a person who holds an office is a person who gets a gift.

[1 : 26] Now, you see that in kind of prototype form with the apostles in the Gospels as he sends them off on mission and empowers them to do the mission.

Then he tells them at the end of their time together, he gives the Great Commission, go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them, right? And he tells them to wait for the empowerment.

And so they wait. And you see in Acts chapter 2, these apostles who are in this office, who are supposed to be taking out the Great Commission, are now empowered with this gift of being able to speak other languages, so that they can disciple the nations, right?

It's that reversal of the Tower of Babel, if you will, in that regard. And the whole reason that he's going through this discussion is because the Corinthians, always having trouble, have written to him asking about spiritual gifts, and it seems that their issue has to do with who's the most important. Who are the ones that are the super spiritual ones? And they seem to think that if you speak in tongues, you're probably the more spiritual one. Now, I thought of an analogy that might help us sort of understand why that would be the case.

[2 : 53] Have you ever been listening to someone speak about an issue, and they're, say, like from England, and they have this British accent, and they have all kinds of different words than we do, and they have even sometimes a better vocabulary, a deeper, richer, bigger word vocabulary, and when you listen to them talk with that accent, it's very easy to think to yourself that this person is smarter than you because it has an accent, it sounds foreign, it sounds exotic, they've got big words.

But in truth, they're not any smarter than us. But just that feel that here's someone that we raise up on a pedestal. I think that the Corinthians struggled with that kind of a thing, that somebody who had great eloquence, somebody who maybe even spoke several languages, they're thinking this person is somebody who is special.

So chapter 12, Paul basically lays out, listen, here's the point of spiritual gifts. It's not for selfish ends.

It's an expression of unity. It's an empowerment by the Holy Spirit for the spread of the gospel. That's what it's about. What happens between chapter 12 and 13 is so fascinating to me.

So I want you to look, chapter 12, we're going to read verse 27 through 31. I just want you to see the paragraph, but I'm really after the very last verse. He says, Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it, and God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues or languages.

[4 : 50] Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

Now that's my first stop. The higher gifts. Some gifts are better than others. Some gifts are higher than others. If you think about the illustration of the body, my hand is actually more important than my pinky fingernail.

But now if I lose my pinky fingernail, I'm going to feel it. And it's not going to be pleasant. And it is a part of my body. But it's not as vital to my functionality as my hand.

I think that's the way these gifts work. Some of them are more vital than others. And that's what Paul is saying here. Earnestly desire the higher gifts. The ones that produce better things.

Now he's going to come back to that in chapter 14. But then he says this. And I will show you still a more excellent way. Rather than having to worry about who's got what gift so that we can be united as a church, so that we can accomplish the mission that we're going to accomplish, rather than navel-gazing and trying to figure out what gift you have or what gift anybody else has, the more excellent way, Paul says, this is a better way for us to function as a church.

[6 : 19] Now here's why this is important. Because anytime someone begins to talk about gifts, eventually the idea of every member ministry is going to come into play.

And here's what I mean. Back in the 80s, there was the church growth movement. And the church growth movement said that your church will not grow, kind of like any other organization or business, if the people of that church do not have a sense of buy-in to what's happening in the church.

So if you go to an organization like the Rose Garden Club, or you go to a business like somebody starting a contracting business, those businesses grow as people have buy-in.

So they were trying to get churches to have buy-in, so they were saying the best way to have buy-in is for every member to have a job, every member to have a ministry that they do, and the way to determine what your ministry ought to be is with a spiritual gift survey.

You could order it. It was about 20 pages long. It had about 100 questions, and it was like a personality test. And once you took it, you go to the grading part, and you grade it to see these two or three gifts might be the gifts that you have.

[7 : 49] Now, I think Paul the Apostle would be looking at us like, what are you doing? I told you there's a better way.

That better way is love. That better way is love. And that's what chapter 13 is all about. And he tells us three things about love.

He tells us the necessity of love, the character of love, and the endurance of love. Under the necessity of love, okay?

And verses one through three, he says this, if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

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. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body up to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

[8 : 56] Now, whatever all of these things mean, and we can talk about that just briefly in a second, the point is this. If there's no love, then it doesn't matter what kind of gift or spiritual power you have.

That spiritual power, that gifting, is useless without love. Love is necessary for a church to survive, function, and succeed.

You must have love. His statements here are interesting because if you look at the verse 2, this is where you sort of see the pattern of what he's doing here.

These are a particular Greek structure, and you don't have to know the name, but it's the kind of structure in which he is giving a hypothetical with an actual.

So, for instance, if I have prophetic powers, did Paul the apostle have prophetic powers? Yes, he did. He was an apostle.

[10 : 07] He's written scripture. That is a part of the prophetic office and gifting. He goes on to say, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge.

Now, okay, take the words as they are. Could Paul the apostle understand all mysteries and all knowledge? Who alone can understand all mysteries and all knowledge?

God. That's that omniscience. So what he's saying is, if this actual thing that I can do and this hypothetical thing that I can't do, even if both are true, but I don't have love, then it's useless. So the same thing goes with the tongues of men and the tongues of angels. He can't actually speak in the tongues of angels. Nobody knows what that language is, but he can speak in the language of men, right?

And he does have faith, but he can't really remove a mountain. Okay, now we've got to talk about that one for a second, because why? Because that comes from Jesus. Jesus went up on the mountain of transfiguration, he came down, and he makes this statement that if you have faith, as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, be you removed, and it'll go from here to the sea.

[11 : 19] And so is that, does Jesus mean that I could walk out there with enough faith and tell Big Rock to go to the Pacific Ocean? Can I do that?

No. And here's why. When Jesus came down from the mountain, this guy approaches and says, your disciples couldn't cast the demon out of my son.

And Jesus is telling his disciples, if you had had faith, you could say to the mountain, be you removed. He's talking about this mountain of this boy being possessed by this demon, right?

So Jesus is using the real idea of a mountain to refer to something. He's using it symbolically, right?

So Paul's taking it up as a real thing then and saying, do I have all faith?

Well, I have faith. To remove mountains? No, I can't actually do that. I can give away all that I have, and Paul certainly did that. He talks in Philippians about how he's learned how to live with little, right?

[12 : 27] But deliver your body up to be burned? Let me ask you something. Do you love Jesus enough that you go run, find somebody who hates a Christian and says, please burn my body?

No, no. And the point in saying all that is that it's necessary to love, and it doesn't matter if you have something you actually can do or even something you can't even do, but you could do it.

So he's raising the bar to say such great spiritual powers without love are useless. If we do not have love for one another, it doesn't matter whatever else we do.

And so we hear somebody has some sort of trouble and we take them a plate of food, which is a very beautiful thing that so many in this community do for one another.

If we do that because I want to pat on my back for being a good person or I want to kind of just show that I'm a good person to you and maybe get you to do something for me in return, that act is useless as a way of binding the church together, as a way of being every member ministry.

[13 : 46] But as so many in this community, when they do that, they do it out of love. They do it out of love because love is necessary.

Without the love as the basis and the foundation for ministry, then there's nothing else that matters. So we got to have love, okay? All right. Second thing then is he moves from there to talking about the character of love.

And by the way, if you need to ask me a question, just stop me because I'm just going to keep rolling if you don't stop me. So just feel free. So the character of love.

Now, we all know this. You probably have seen this on a piece of art somewhere in somebody's house. Maybe it was read at your wedding, right? A lot of times this is read at a wedding.

It's a very beautiful passage. He says, 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.

[14 : 49] It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. Now, we'll pause right there in the middle of verse 8 because I think that all kind of goes together. And I really think love never ends is the transition phrase between verses 4 and verses 8 through 13.

But let's talk about this passage for a second because it is used in a lot of weddings and it's even used in a lot of premarital counseling. You know, I was told to take that passage and take out the word love and put my name in it.

Do I really love my wife? And so Brady is patient and kind. You know, and part of me, as I judge myself, I kind of go like, no. But then they were telling us, you know, put your future spouse's name in there.

So, you know, I put Michelle's name in there. Michelle is patient and kind. And of course, at that time, swooning over each other, you know, bound and determined to get married, I go, oh yes, she is very patient and kind.

[15:58] You know, now 30 years later, yeah, anyway, anyway. I'm just kidding. Yes, we've both grown. We see.

Here's the thing. If you read that and you really are honest with yourself about if you love in these ways, and we're going to describe them in detail here in a second, you're going to have to say, I can't do this.

I can't do this. And I think that it might be a good analogy to say that much of this seems like the outworking of the fruit of the Spirit in the particular situation of me loving someone.

So, for example, the fruit of the Spirit, and from Galatians 5, 22 through 23, Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is this, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. If you think about living out self-control, I can't do that in my own strength and power. That comes by the power of the Holy Spirit working in me to have the kind of self-control that pleases the Lord.

[17:10] Patience is not something that comes natural, but instead it's by the work of the Holy Spirit in me to be patient in a way that honors the Lord.

Now, as my patience grows because of the work of the Holy Spirit, and that patience gets applied to the relationship between me and my wife, between me and Jack, what we're talking about here in these characteristics of love are the work of the Holy Spirit in us, producing in us all of this love to be that which God longs for us to have and demands of us to have.

So my love being patient and kind is not going to be because I'm a good person and I pull myself up by my bootstraps and I just gut it out. It's going to be because the Holy Spirit has worked in me to help me to be loving in that way.

So, with that said then, I just want to walk through these qualities and these characteristics real quick. I'm just going to give a brief sort of definition of each one.

Patient is that being tranquil while waiting, right? It's not becoming annoyed by having to wait on someone, but my love for you is patient when I'm long-suffering with you.

[18:32] My love for you is kind when that kindness is expressed in doing good for you. Something that is good for you in doing that. There's this action that's involved.

Love does not envy or boast. In other words, my love is not about me wanting to heap praise upon myself. Right?

You can love in such a way as to try to get people to heap praise upon yourself. If you don't believe that's true, then let's have a conversation about me from the time I was born until somewhere in the middle of after getting saved and just the work that the Lord had to do on me because I'm very good at doing that.

Loving people in such a way as to get from them praise for myself. But that's not love. And that's not what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to love in such a way as to benefit them, to put them first.

Not arrogant, right? Not having an overinflated view of myself. Not thinking of myself more than I ought to. But instead, as I love someone, I'm thinking of them first.

[19:41] Not me first. It's not rude. Rude is this kind of indecent or vulgar. The way I would define vulgar is something like you've been invited to a wedding.

It's an evening wedding. Everything is nice and classical and sort of traditional in this wedding. And you show up riding on a muddy donkey and you ride it right into the sanctuary.

That's pretty vulgar. That's pretty indecent, rude, and inappropriate. So we're not talking about the kind of vulgarity in the movies and normal life that people have out there, but something that's totally inappropriate.

That doesn't match. And so my love is not that way. Instead, my love is disciplined and fitting to the moment. Love does not insist on its own way.

Right? It's my way or the highway. That's not love. Yes, I will do this for you, but you're going to do this for me.

[20:47] I think the biblical example of this is Jacob and Esau. Esau comes up and says, I'm starving to death. I need some stew. I'll give you some stew. Sell me your birthright.

That is not love. Not love at all. Love is not irritable. In other words, love is not provoked. And love does not provoke. So in other words, love, when I love someone and they do something that

typically could be annoying to me by the power of the Holy Spirit, my love for them keeps me from getting irritated and provoked inside because of the thing that they did that probably isn't good and right.

It's not resentful. In other words, it doesn't keep track of offenses. What's interesting is this word here is actually a mathematical term that means to count.

Love doesn't count the wrongs. It also does not rejoice in doing wrong, but rejoices with the truth. I think that's a fascinating comparison because wrongdoing is like evil or unrighteousness or iniquity. So that sinful type stuff, love doesn't rejoice in sinful things, but rejoices in the truth or with the truth. Love bears all things.

[22 : 06] Love bears all things. This word bear, he uses it in his letter to the Thessalonians, and he said that he wanted to see them. He said, when I could bear it no more, I sent somebody to you.

He could not keep it contained any longer. He had to go. So for love to bear all things means that love covers. The idea here is the idea of confidentiality.

It is a holding down, keeping and covered, not letting something out that would be a bad thing. Believes all things.

Love believes all things. The word here for believe is the word for faith. Pistuo. It means to trust or to entrust yourself to something. It's a part of our salvation, right?

In order for us to be saved, we're entrusting ourself to Jesus Christ. So I'm entrusting myself to another person. My love for you means that I'm entrusting myself to you, giving myself over, not questioning that.

[23 : 15] You know, I know that I have a wife that loves me, and I never have to ask the question, are you poisoning my food? I've entrusted myself to her.

My love for her means that I believe she's trustworthy enough that I don't ever have to question or wonder about if she's putting poison in my food. I have just given myself over to her in that way. She's done the same with me. She trusts me. I think a way to think about that in a large scale is to think that that means that as things crop up in our lives of potential conflict, her actions, I need to view them from that vantage point of having entrusted myself to her, and that means that she's got my best interest at heart, and so I need to believe the best of her actions in that moment and not just assume the worst because I think a lot of times we assume the worst.

It says that it hopes all things that hope is the idea of looking forward and longing to see. So when you love someone, you long to see them. You want to see them.

It endures all things. Now, I thought it was interesting that it bears all things because I thought to myself bear all things and endure all things would be the same, but they're not because that bear does mean to kind of cover, but the endure all things means to be immovable, not budging.

[24 : 44] And so here I am to love the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and somebody comes along one day after a service and says ugly things to me and I think to myself, I'm never going back to that church.

Well, no, love endures all things. Love won't budge. And so, no, I'm going to stay loving the church even if I get mistreated.

Nothing's going to keep me from staying committed right here with these people. Love never ends. Love never ends.

The only way for love to never end is for love to be eternal, and the only way for love to be eternal is for love to be divine, for love to come from divine.

And so there's so much of our love that we have that is from the Lord. There's this passage in John 17 in Jesus' prayer where he says down in verse 26, he says, I've made known to them, talking about the disciples and those who will believe based upon the disciples' word, I've made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known that the love with which you have loved me may be in them.

[26 : 13] I'm telling them the name of the Father, teaching them all the truth about who God is, so that the love that the Father has for the Son may be a love that dwells within the disciples.

an eternal, divine love. The only way that you and I are going to make it into eternity loving one another is if that love is something that is supplied to us by God, something that is of a divine nature itself.

So here's all of this quality of this love. Obviously, you look at that, and I just go back to my statement, that has not come natural.

I mean, most of the time when we think about love in this world, the things that naturally occur are going to be things that come out of preference and come out of being served, come out of, you know, a commonality and reciprocity.

This kind of love is a love that I cannot work up in myself for you. This is a love that happens because God works in me, because he works in me, and because he's rescued me.

[27 : 41] But this is the kind of love that we are to have, and it's this kind of love that fuels every member ministry. I don't have to go around wondering, what is my spiritual gift so I can use it to serve others?

I will serve others if I have this kind of love for you. And since I can't work it up on my own, the only way I can love you properly is if I am making sure that my walk and relationship with the Lord is where it ought to be, and he is growing me in that, and then out of that love for you I act, and I do. So this love fuels and furthers this every member ministry. There are places I think it's not, it is not a gift from chapter 12, 13, 14.

I do think there are places that love is considered like a gift from God, but not in the same kind of sense as what we see here in chapter 12. All right, any other questions?

That's a good question. The last part is then the endurance of this love, because he says in verse 8, love never ends, and then he has this really interesting statement where he says, as for prophecies, they will pass, as for tongues, they will cease, as for knowledge, it will pass away, for we know in part, we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

[29 : 29] 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, 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've been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide these three, but the greatest of these is love.

Now, if you can picture it like a chart, he's got partial and full. Those are his two categories, partial and full.

Prophecy, tongues, these gifts, they're all partial. They're not full, they're partial. Our knowledge is partial.

When he speaks about the child, he's placing the child, the immaturity in the category of the partial.

When he speaks about the mirror, seeing in the mirror dimly, that's the partial.

[30 : 36] So there's something that's partial here and the big picture is it's partial knowledge. That right now, in the state that we're in, we have partial knowledge.

Even though we have prophecy, even though we have tongues, even though we know some things, it is partial, it's childlike, it's not mature, it's looking through a glass dimly.

Then there's the full. Well, when the full is there, prophecy's gone, tongues are gone, and the knowledge is full. Matter of fact, the knowledge is full in such a way that it's maturity, like manhood, right?

Like a mature man rather than a child. It's not looking through a glass dimly, but it's looking face to face. Right? It's seeing face to face.

It's full knowledge. So Paul is saying, we have this experience, one day we will have this experience, and the thing that divides it is the perfect.

[31 : 40] When the perfect comes, then we will have this. Now, what is that perfect? The answer is, I don't know. There are some who would say that that perfect is the finishing of the canon and the scriptures.

I just, I just don't think that that fits with the context that's here. A lot of scholars would say that this is like maybe the second coming of Christ or just the being transferred from this life to the next and, you know, some end time type of thing.

That's probably right. It probably is that when we go to be with the Lord, we don't need prophecy anymore. We don't need tongues anymore. The partial knowledge we had here upon this earth is now replaced with the full knowledge.

We're not seeing God dimly through a glass, if you will, but we're seeing face to face. And the point is this, is that the love that we have for one another lasts into eternity.

eternity. Our growing in this love goes with us into eternity. Love never ends.

[33 : 07] Faith, hope, and love, the three of those abide. The greatest is love. So the love that I have for you now and that I grow in goes with me into eternity.

And one day when we're standing before the throne, we get to pick up where we left off. We get to pick up right where we left off.

Growing and learning about one another, loving one another. We don't stop loving one another when we get to heaven. And I think that what we get is we get a perfection in love when we get to heaven.

You know, oftentimes we say we need to love one another here because we're going to have to spend eternity with one another. And yes, that's true, but when you and I get to eternity, we're both going to be perfected in Christ and neither one of us are going to be annoying.

But as we love one another here and now, we get to build on that as we get to eternity. And so every member ministry is this work of God in my life in which that work spills over onto you as I seek to put you first ahead of myself.

[34 : 26] And that shows up in some really interesting ways in Scripture. You can see Paul saying some things and even Jesus where they say things like forgive one another, bear with one another, bear one another's burdens, encourage one another, hold one another accountable.

He talks about speaking the truth in love to one another. He talks about discipling one another, making disciples of the nations.

all of these things are ways that that love gets acted out. And so when it comes to every member ministry, we need to spend far more time working on our relationship with the Lord so that he works in us to help us to love one another, and then we need to act out that love.

And that is a far better every member ministry than trying to guess what some gift you might have might be. And so how do we get there?

I just want to read one last passage to you. In John's letter, the first one, he writes in chapter 4, verse 10, he says, in this is love, not that you have loved God, but that he loved you and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

[36 : 01] In this is love that God sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. Part of the way that we have love is because of what Christ has done on the cross.

1 John 4, 10. In other words, because of what Christ has done for us on the cross, out of God's love, I can look at the times that I fail to love and find the forgiveness that I need, but I can also look to the cross to know that he has at the cross paid and purchased the promises and the power to be in me to help me grow in the love that I need.

I can't have love apart from the gospel. I just can't have love apart from the gospel. And that's where we need to spend our energies and our time.

Knowing the gospel, loving the gospel, believing the gospel, spreading the gospel, and then we grow in love. Any questions or thoughts?

Any questions or thoughts? You know, I just sort of, by the way, I've taken probably ten of those things.

[37 : 33] And I came out with a different spiritual gift every time. Right.

I don't want to give the impression that there's no need to think about these kinds of things. There was actually a thing that one church put out called your shape for ministry.

And your shape was, forget the first one, but spiritual gifts. But then it was your heart, your abilities, your personality, and your experience.

And I think that your heart, abilities, personality, and experiences are very good to look at to say, what kinds of things would I enjoy doing?

There are some people whose personality is they cannot really abide small children. Well, maybe they shouldn't work with small children. There's other people to work with.

[38 : 40] But there's some people who just adore and love small children. Well, but you don't need to navel gaze too much on that in terms of like this spiritual gift thing to know that.

But you look at your abilities. Do you have the ability to teach those children? If you don't, what do you have the ability? I have the ability to love them and make them feel welcomed?

Then maybe you're not the teacher. Maybe you're another position. I just think it's a lot simpler than we typically make it. And so that is important, and I'm glad that you've fought for it here.

But I just want us to know that we just got to love. That's the fuel, and I think we can get there from there. So.