

# FOCUSING ON WHAT MATTERS MOST

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



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1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
19th Message  
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*1 Corinthians 13:1-13*

We have been walking through the book of Corinthians for several weeks. The apostle Paul had taken a trip to Corinth. He stayed there for a year and a half (Acts 18:11). After leaving Corinth, he would later get messages of several issues within the churches in Corinth. Chapters 12-14 are all part of his addressing issues around how they operated in supernatural gifts and to help bring order to their worship gatherings. It is here that he writes these words.

## **1 Corinthians 13:4-7,13:**

**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.**

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

The year was the 2004 Olympics, and the atmosphere was electric during the 50-meter rifle three-position final. Matthew Emmons was in the lead with a solid three-point advantage over his competitor. The unexpected happened as he stepped up to the stage for his final shot. Some people even called it the impossible shot! Matthew hit the target right in the center, and the crowd excitedly erupted. But as he looked up at the scoreboard, his heart sank when he saw a “0.” Confusion washed over him until he realized the unthinkable—he had hit perfectly but aimed at the wrong target!

It is possible to achieve success in the wrong area by focusing your aim on the incorrect target. I believe that is what the apostle Paul was getting at with the church in Corinth. This letter is in response to news that the church had been focusing on the wrong thing. They thought they were in good standing with the Lord because they had spiritual gifts. That the gifts made them “spiritual.” They would even operate in these “spiritual gifts” while

mistreating one another and using them to look down on each other—the mistaken spiritual gifts for fruits of the spirit.

I know this passage has a flowery, poetic nature, but Paul claims it is not about your gifts. You are aiming at the wrong target. Your gathering together should be marked with love. I believe this passage is ever so applicable to our church and community today. It is possible to be gifted, have outstanding accomplishments, and miss what matters the most.

I've titled our time today as “Focusing on What Matters Most.” The text communicates that Christian worship should be marked by other-oriented love. For without it, our ministry morally amounts to nothing. This letter is divided into three sections. Paul's first section deals with the importance of love. The second section (verses 4-7) gives a picture of love. The last section (verses 8-10) discusses love's eternal nature.

## **Importance of love**

### **1 Corinthians 13:1-3:**

**If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned] but have not love, I gain nothing.**

Paul strategically uses the very gifts that the churches in Corinth prized themselves on having: speaking, knowledge, and prophecy. He employs a literary tool of amplification because he builds each one.

It is helpful to note the noisy gong or clanging symbol. Scholars believe Paul is pointing to Corinth, a bustling city of trade, importing and exporting, and they were known for their bronze. Some cults would use bronze to make these gongs to worship the gods of

Dionysus (god of nature) and Cybele (goddess of wild animals). One writer says it is as annoying as the sound of constantly barking dogs. Some cults would do this to get the attention of the gods. Could this be a picture of people speaking or operating in gifts without walking in love with one another, motivated by self-glory?

It is this equation:

Speak + No Love = Nothing

Knowledge + No Love = Nothing

Give + No Love = Nothing

Speaking without love equals nothing. Knowledge without love equals nothing. Giving yourself up to be burned without love equals nothing. In other words, you may be applauded or admired for what you can do, but without being motivated by love, it amounts to nothing. It begs the question, what motivates us to do what we do? Are we operating in our gifts out of love?

I grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, where I got started in music ministry. I remember participating in our church choir and practicing for this worship night. Let's just say I wasn't so kind to my brother. Our minister of music pulled me to the side right before the concert, and he sat me down. He had watched how I hadn't been kind to my brother, and he essentially said if you cannot walk in love with your brother, you cannot sing in my choir. That hit me like a ton of bricks. What he was trying to say is a sentiment of our text here that it is not about how gifted you are. It is not about hitting the right notes. If you're not walking in love, it amounts to nothing.

Because it is possible to do good things and be good at doing good things in and through the church, but for all the wrong reasons. What is our motivation? Are we operating in our gifts motivated by love? If not, speak to the angels and men. Speak in tongues until you're blue in the face. You can have all knowledge and all faith. You can even give yourself away for a worthy cause. Without love, it equals nothing. That's how important it is to love. Paul then transitions to the second section of the letter, where he now gives a picture of love.

## Picture of love

### 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7:

**Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or**

**resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

This is not an exhaustive list of love. If you trace it back, much of what Paul addressed the church in the previous chapters refers to their actions towards one another as puffed up, self-seeking, and rude. Notice it never says that love feels good. It's not about feeling or emotion. This is where the English vernacular does not help us a whole lot. We use the same words for "I love pizza" and "I love my mother." They are the same thing, but they are two very different things. This love that Paul is speaking about is not a flowery infatuation kind of love. He did not use the word *eros*, meaning romantic love, or the Greek word *philio*, a friendship type of love. He uses the word *agape*, an unconditional, unconditional love. It is other-oriented, selfless, sacrificial, and active.

As we think about this in our community and church context, walking in *agape* love can look like leading a small group where someone has a particular gift to tap dance on your last nerve. Walking in *agape* love is choosing to be kind to them even if it frustrates you. Walking in *agape* love in our community, as we operate in our gifts, can look like celebrating someone else's gift. As the text says, not being envious of what someone else has been given from God, but fanning the flame of encouragement. After all, it's God who supplies every good and perfect gift. We did not give ourselves these gifts; it all comes from God. We are called to be patient with one another, be kind to one another, not be envious of one another, and walk in *agape* love with one another.

Do you envy how your brother or sister is gifted? All of these things have the theme of being others-oriented. The question is not whether I can speak in the tongues of angels and men, have all the knowledge and faith, or achieve these things. The question with this picture of love that Paul paints has someone else in mind. Does it benefit your brothers and sisters, and does it glorify God? He then wraps up with the last section. After unpacking the importance of love and the picture of love, he then talks about the nature of love.

### 1 Corinthians 13: 8-10:

**Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.**

This last section can be summed up with the very first part of verse 8. Love never ends. It is eternal. Notice the highlighted phrases there. Prophecies will pass away. Tongues will cease. Knowledge will pass away. When the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. This is getting at the idea that it does not matter how gifted you may be. At some point, at the end of time, there will be no need for prophecies or tongues or knowledge. All of these gifts have an endpoint. As one writer says, they're all signposts pointing to a destination. Once you get there, there's no need for the signpost. Scholar and theologian NT Wright says it this way:

*Love is God's river, flowing on into the future, across the border into the country where there is no pride, no jostling for position, no contention among God's people. We are invited to step into that river here and now and let it take us where it's going.*<sup>1</sup>

He then uses two metaphors to unpack the permanence, and eternal nature of love.

### **1 Corinthians 13:11-12:**

**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.<sup>12</sup> 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.**

Paul says, "When I was a child." I believe Paul is saying that certain things are appropriate for a child at their age that are not appropriate as they get older. Likewise, these gifts are suitable for our age, but in the age to come, there is no need to exercise these particular things. Paul has in mind eschatology: theology dealing with the end times, the last days. His message to the church was that the things they prioritized and put on a pedestal wouldn't last forever! They are not eternal. Love is.

The second metaphor is of mirrors. As mentioned earlier, Corinth was known for its bronze. They would have polished bronze mirrors. They were not as clear as the mirrors we have today so you would have a dimly lit image. Likewise, in this life, we only see and operate in part of the fullness that is to come. At best, when you use your gifts, it is a small picture of the mosaic that will be fully realized in heaven. He uses all of this to talk about the eternal nature of love. These other gifts will pass away, but love will never end.

When I am away on a work trip, I Facetime my wife and kids to say hello. When I arrive home, I don't need to Facetime them anymore. There will be a time when we will be face-to-face with our Savior and King. When we get to heaven, there will be no need for prophecy, gifts of healing, or superior knowledge. With that, Paul tells the church in Corinth to focus on what matters. He shows them the importance of love, gives them a picture of love, and lets them know it is eternal.

That's why he can say of these three:

### **1 Corinthians 13:13:**

**So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.**

There's a devotional exercise where you evaluate in light of this part of the passage. Where do you ask yourself which of these things are true? And what are these things that are not true of me and our community? If I could be honest and confess, my answer was like my son Ezra's. There are times when I will ask Ezra, "Hey bud, are you using your listening ears?" And with all honesty, he will look me dead in the eye and say, "A little bit." And I find that being my answer. The reality is that in and of myself. At best, my answer is "Sometimes. A little bit."

But the good news of the gospel, friend, is that everything Paul emphasizes when he speaks about love—its importance, nature, activity, and eternal nature—all points to Jesus Christ. God is love. There is only one person who fits the bill of everything that is laid out. Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. He's patient with us in all of our idiosyncrasies, shortcomings, and, time and time again, of us not getting it right. He was kind enough to come down and leave his throne of glory to die on the cross for our sins when we talk about love. When we talk about love, you cannot talk about it without pointing to that person of Jesus Christ. So what do we do with this exhortation from Paul? We could look at it as a to-do list or recognize that it all points to a person who has the power to transform our hearts.

Tim Keller says it like this:

*It can either fill you with pride because you think you are doing it, or it will fill you with fear because you know you are not. Or you can look at Jesus Christ doing it for you. It destroys your fear, destroys your pride, and begins to regenerate your heart from the inside. See him doing it for you, and eventually, it will be reproduced in you.*<sup>2</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Wright, Tom. Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004.)
1. Keller, Timothy. "Love and the Fruit of the Spirit." Sermon, Redeemer Church, New York, NY. Accessed March 2, 2025. <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/love-and-the-fruit-of-the-spirit/>.

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