

Parson to Person
1 Corinthians 13
(The Greatest: Love)

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; “But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:1–13).

Gifts and Benefits

Paul made a case for the Corinthian's need of education concerning those things "*spiritual*" (1 Corinthians 12:1) and developed a semi-detailed list of a number of the Spiritual gifts. Moreover, he encouraged the Corinthians to "*earnestly desire the best gifts*" (1 Corinthians 12:31)—namely those that bring benefit to others.

Before moving on to the proper use of tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophecy, etc. (in Chapter 14), Paul placed emphasis on the fact that all the power, authority, insight, giftedness, or even personal sacrifice one might employ, if it is not inspired by genuine others-centered love, the intrinsic value of one's personal worth is unenhanced—"*I am nothing*" (vs. 2), and/or the personal gain of fruitfulness is unachieved—"*it profits me nothing*" (vs. 3).

It Profits You—Therefore, It Profits Me?

Paul did not say that all he might do would fail if he "*[had] not love.*" Paul did not say that others can't or won't benefit from what he said or did if he "*[had] not love*"—for others may nonetheless benefit. One might give to the poor or provide knowledge, wisdom, etc., to others out of obligation or selfish motivation, but if the service or provision is not properly motivated and inspired, it is of no fruit to the "servant."

Jesus' rebuke of the Jewish religious leaders during His first incarnational earthly ministry aptly illustrates work without genuine love (see Matthew 23).

Rewards?

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul explained that there are differing valuations placed upon activities and/or personal work. Some are said to be “*wood, hay, straw,*” and others “*gold, silver, precious stones*” (see 1 Corinthians 3). Without a doubt Paul backed up that revelation by underscoring that a believer’s “work,” uninspired by love, is of little value.

Few, if any, fully understand the purpose, measure, fullness, or degree of rewards a believer may receive, but we are told that every believer will be rewarded for faithfulness—in this life and in the life to come. (See Matthew 5:12, 6:1–4, 1 Corinthians 9:16–18, Colossians 3:23–24, etc.)

What Love Looks Like (Part 1) (A Miscalculation: My Crisis Regarding the Nature of Jesus)

a. When Love Looks Like Intolerance

Earlier in this letter to the Corinthians, Paul addressed church discipline (1 Corinthians 5). Notably, this passage on love may not look like it fits well into the whole of the letter’s tone—namely correcting many errors in the Church. However, love, while being patient, kind, etc., is indeed a part of the overall work of love as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Genuine love is also protective of “others.” Discipline, while unpleasant at any given moment, is restorative. All Church discipline is designed to help those in error and protect the ones who may otherwise be negatively affected. God wants his people protected and secure. His love is kind “*does not*

rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails” (vss. 6–8a). Therefore, the motivation of Paul—while looking like criticism—is indeed love.

b. When Love Looks Like Hate (Isaiah 24? Revelation 4–19)

God’s Judgment, while motivated by love, is often considered hate by those who don’t know His character and motivation. Consider the judgment of God against sin, Israel in sin, the church when in error, etc. God is love. Even His holy hatred for sin (as sin harms) and His judgments are temporary—and serve the greater good. *“When that which is perfect has come, (sinlessness, righteousness, truth, justice, etc.) then that which is in part will be done away”* (vs. 10).

Where Love Serves Best

Love is fertilizing, watering, and fruit producing. Love is greatly beneficial to those whose soil is tilled and receptive. Herein, then, a brief look at the best recipients of love should be considered.

a. Those Regarded as a Smoldering Flax or a Bruised Reed

John the Baptist, when introducing Jesus, the Messiah, said, *“A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, till He sends forth justice to victory”* (Matthew 12:20). Therefore, we know that His patient love is manifest toward all—but fruitful among the receptive.

b. The Humble

The receptive are those who see themselves as *“poor in spirit”* (Matthew 5:3). The Lord has made clear that *“the one who comes to [Him] will by no means [be] cast out”* (Matthew 6:37). Moreover, we know that *“The LORD lifts up the humble; He casts the wicked down to the ground”* (Psalm 147:6), and *“The LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD raises those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous”* (Psalm 146:8). Therefore, *“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up”* (James 4:10).

The True Source of Genuine “Agape Love.”

As frail and helpless men and women, we should all understand that genuine “agape love” is not the work of man, not the product of human effort, and by no means the natural propensity of the unregenerated. However, as the Holy Spirit does His work in us, He will produce His nature in each of us, and we will grow in His divine and perfect love. This is the gold; this is the silver; this is the precious gem!

I love you all,
Pastor Paul