THE GREATEST OF THESE

1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13

Key Verse: 13:13

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

What is love? The first definition in the dictionary is “an intense feeling of deep affection.” The second one is “a great interest and pleasure in something.” The third is “to feel a deep romantic or sexual attraction to.” People often confuse love with lust. This seems to have been happening in Corinth. The city had a temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. Since ancient times Corinth had a reputation for prostitution. Confusing love with lust had seeped into the church, so in this letter Paul has to teach about sexual immorality. Another common misunderstanding is that love is a poetic ideal or a concept—not really real. So young boys tend to say love is gross and only for girls. Today many people mistake love for ignoring people’s bad behavior and accepting people without question. The word “love” is still so appealing, and it’s still so desperately needed in our world. But what *is* love, really?

The Bible has a lot to say about love, and 1 Corinthians 13 might be its most famous chapter on the subject. The words in this chapter are poetic, powerful, and still ring true for all kinds of people, all around the world. We should remember that Paul wrote these words to the church in Corinth, perhaps the most difficult, problem-filled church mentioned in the Bible. Why was Paul writing to them about love? What is this love, why is it so important, and how can we not just admire it but really live with it? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

As we’ve seen in our study of 1 Corinthians, this church was full of problems: divisions, pride, immorality, lawsuits, prostitution, idolatry, selfishness, rejection of authority, and disorderly worship. Some thought they were “super-spiritual” because of their knowledge and ability to speak in tongues. In chapter 12 Paul began addressing the issue, and in chapter 14 he will conclude it. But here in chapter 13 he pauses to discuss what these people really needed.

So why was this church such a mess? Many believe it was due to the environment in Corinth. The city had been left destroyed for 100 years but had been newly rebuilt around 44 BC. People were coming to Corinth from all over the Roman Empire to restart their lives. Many had lived as slaves, but in this new booming economy of Corinth they were seeking a better life. So the city came to have a reputation for cutthroat competition. So there was a famous saying, “If you go to Corinth, be careful not to lose your shirt!” Those who had accepted the gospel through Paul brought this reality with them into the church. Some might call it “spiritual competition,” but it was really not the gospel; in fact, it was harmful. Paul had been struggling in various ways to help these people. Now he appeals to them with some of the most moving words ever written about love.

Look at 12:31. Paul has been trying to help these people broaden their view of spiritual gifts. These gifts were not just speaking in tongues, but all kinds of spiritual gifts given for the common good of everybody in the church fellowship. Paul tells them the same thing in 14:1, to “eagerly desire” gifts of the Spirit. Some people mistakenly think that Paul writes about love in chapter 13 to say we shouldn’t even bother with gifts of the Spirit. But Paul turns to love as the most excellent way to actually be desiring and using our spiritual gifts.

Read verses 1–3. Here Paul is talking about the necessity of love. He repeats the word “all” here three times. And he makes it personal, using the word “I.” He describes the most epic things any Christian could ever do or know. The Corinthians were probably bragging about being able to do some of these things. The shocker is that, without love, Paul says, all these great things would turn out to be “nothing.” He says, “I am” nothing and “I gain” nothing.” Wow! Nothing? Often Christian life can seem like we need to be frantically doing and saying many things. Honestly, it can seem like a lot of obnoxious noise.

In contrast, Paul turns to describe what it means to “have love.” Read verses 4–7. Here Paul is talking about the character of love. The first thing we notice is how different love is from what Paul has just described in the first three verses. Love is so quiet, so humble, so genuine. It’s not epic; it’s something even the lowliest person can have, and often does. Paul’s first words about love are: “Love is patient, love is kind.” If we were asked to define love, we might say “Love is a powerful feeling” or “Love is the greatest self-sacrifice.” The second definition is true. Jesus Christ showed us what love is when he laid down his life for us. The Greek word for love here, “agape,” means selfless love. But Paul doesn’t say “Love is selfless.” He says, “Love is patient, love is kind.” He’s stressing how love actually responds to other human beings.

Patient and kind are words the Bible uses to describe God himself. God is so patient with chronically sinful people. God is so kind even to the most evil, ungrateful, ignorant people. In fact, the Bible says God is love. But God expresses his love practically, through patience and kindness. How can we have a love like his? Honestly, we get impatient with the smallest things; sometimes we’re even downright cruel. But we love with patience and kindness as we get to know God himself. Ephesians 2:7 says God shows the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Jesus. Paul said he was the worst of sinners, but that Christ displayed his immense patience towards him as an example for everyone (1Ti1:16). Like Paul, we get a taste of God’s patience and kindness towards us in Christ who died for us while we were still sinners. As we appreciate this more and more, we begin treating others the same way. If we’re impatient and cruel, it’s a sign we really need to get to know God better.

To support that love is patient and kind, Paul also lists in seven ways what love is not: “It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs” (4b,5). Here Paul seems to be speaking directly to the Corinthians’ own behavior towards each other. To them it must have been so convicting. “Envy” can also mean “jealousy.” When we love someone, we’re not jealous. Paul wrote in 8:1 that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” People filled with knowledge tend to boast or be proud or dishonor others. But love makes us just the opposite. If we’re going to be loving people, clearly we need more than feelings; we need self-discipline. To have love, we need to be careful not to dishonor others, or to put our own interests first, or to be quick to get angry, or to keep a list of the wrongs others have done. If we really think about it, love in action is much harder than we think. In fact, in ourselves we just can’t do it. But as we come to God and are renewed in his love, his love begins to fill our minds and hearts. His love helps us see people as those created in his own image. His love changes us into unselfish and gracious and forgiving people.

Paul says in verse 6, “Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.” As we know, people tend to dwell on the negative. They like focusing on others’ faults and failings and gossiping about them. But love helps us avoid this spiritually sick tendency. Love helps us rejoice with the truth. In Greek the word “together” is there. When we’re loving, we rejoice with our fellow Christians as we focus on God’s truth together. It means that love keeps things positive.

Read verse 7 again. In Greek the word “always” is literally “all.” And that word is repeated here four times, for emphasis. It can be translated: “Love protects/bears *all*, trusts *all*, hopes *all*, perseveres *all*.” To some people love can sound weak. But the love Paul describes is so strong! How can we bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things? Only the love of God can make us that strong. When we trust in God and hope in God, we can protect others and persevere with them unconditionally. This verse reminds us of how our Lord Jesus loved his disciples. They were slow to learn, struggled with their own desires for greatness and failed to support him in prayer when he really needed it. But he still loved them. He even loved Judas Iscariot his betrayer to the end by sharing a piece of his own bread with him (Jn13). When we rely on ourselves, we easily think, “I can’t bear this anymore!” We so easily give up on people who disappoint us. But when we know and rely on God’s love, it transforms us into the spiritually strongest people in the world.

So far Paul has described the necessity of love and the character of love. Now in the last section he mainly describes the permanence of love. In verse 8a he says, “Love never fails.” In Greek the word is “falls.” It can also mean “come to an end.” God’s love is unfailing and never-ending. Humanly, things may not seem to work out right. But that doesn’t stop God from loving, and we shouldn’t stop, either, even though things may not work out the way we wanted.

To support this statement, Paul comes back to spiritual gifts. In verse 8 he says that in contrast to love, prophecy, tongues and knowledge, the gifts the Corinthians so highly valued, will all come to an end. They end when Jesus comes again and ushers in God’s eternal kingdom. In his kingdom there will be no more need for prophecy or tongues or knowledge, because, according to verse 9, they were all partial anyway. In verse 19 Paul says, “when completeness comes.” It can also be translated “perfection.” It’s the perfection of Jesus himself, the perfection of God’s kingdom, and the perfection of when he fully changes us.

Paul gives more illustrations to show love’s permanence. Read verse 11. Childhood can be lovely in its naivete and simplicity, but it also can be silly and immature. Childhood eventually passes away into mature adulthood, which has so much more depth, wisdom and insight. Paul seems to be describing in this verse how God’s love transforms us from spiritual infants into spiritually mature people. It changes the way we talk, think and reason. We learn to talk, think and reason based on God’s love. Read verse 12. This is a most beloved Bible verse. Paul is describing how our limited perception and knowledge will one day become full-blown. The expression “face to face” seems to be talking about when we see our Lord Jesus Christ in person. It’s something all Christians really hope and long for. It’s only then that our souls will fully grasp his love and be satisfied.

Read verse 13. Of all the Christian activities, only faith, hope and love “remain.” In this context, it seems to mean that only they really matter. But also, they are what should be motivating all we do. Our faith in Jesus leads to hope, and our hope in Jesus leads us to love. And when we get to heaven, we won’t need faith or hope anymore; we’ll just enjoy God’s amazing love forever.

We all really need love; our world really needs love. May God forgive us for pursuing other things. May he newly inspire us to pursue growing in his love. May he make us strong in his love to love all kinds of people. And may our faith and hope in Jesus help us grow to be spiritually mature in his love.