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**Sermon Brief**  
**Text: 1 Cor. 13:1-13**  
**Title: The Greatest Gift**  
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Seeking to faith-  
fully proclaim  
the whole coun-  
cil of God in  
scripture!



**INTRODUCTION**

Today we resume our sermon series on spiritual gifts with a look at one of the most important passages on this topic: 1 Corinthians 13. Hear Paul's words from that text:

12.31b And I will show you a still more excellent way. 1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 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 do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>1</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>2</sup> F66 but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.<sup>3</sup>



In the midst of dealing with a long list of problems plaguing the Christian community at Corinth the apostle utters one of the most profound, poetically beautiful expressions of his entire writing ministry. His "Ode to Love" has become of his most admired writings over the past two millennium.

But what is its context? That, you see, determines greatly its precise meaning. And also serves as a vital part of legitimate interpretation of scripture texts. The new topic indicator in 12:1, Περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν (and now concerning spiritual things [gifts]), introduces the issue of spiritual gifts. This discussion will continue until 15:1 where Paul uses another of his signals of a new topic, Γνωρίζω δὲ ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί,... (And I want you, brothers, to know...). As the previous study in 12:27-31, emphasized, chapters 12, 13, 14 form a chiasm with an aBa' sequence. This places chapter 13 in the center spotlight. The discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter

<sup>1</sup>Other ancient authorities read *body to be burned*

<sup>2</sup>Gk *in a riddle*.

<sup>3</sup>Καὶ ἔτι καθ' ὑπερβολὴν ὁδὸν ὑμῖν δείκνυμι. 13.1 Ἐὰν ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαλῶ καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, γέγονα χαλκὸς ἢ ἤχων ἢ κύμβαλον ἀλαλάζον. 13.2 καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω προφητεῖαν καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γνώσιν καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθέν εἰμι. 13.3 κἂν ψωμίσω πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντά μου καὶ ἐὰν παραδῶ τὸ σῶμά μου ἵνα καυχῆσωμαι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐδὲν ὠφελοῦμαι.

13.4 Ἡ ἀγάπη μακροθυμεῖ, χρηστεύεται ἡ ἀγάπη, οὐ ζηλοῖ, [ἡ ἀγάπη] οὐ περπερεύεται, οὐ φυσιοῦται, 13.5 οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖ, οὐ ζητεῖ τὰ ἑαυτῆς, οὐ παροξύνεται, οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν, 13.6 οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, συχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· 13.7 πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει.

13.8 Ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε πίπτει· εἴτε δὲ προφητεῖται, καταργηθήσονται· εἴτε γλώσσαι, παύσονται· εἴτε γνώσις, καταργηθήσεται. 13.9 ἐκ μέρους γὰρ γινώσκομεν καὶ ἐκ μέρους προφητεύομεν· 13.10 ὅταν δὲ ἔλθῃ τὸ τέλειον, τὸ ἐκ μέρους καταργηθήσεται. 13.11 ὅτε ἦμην νήπιος, ἐλάλουν ὡς νήπιος, ἐφρόνουν ὡς νήπιος, ἐλογιζόμην ὡς νήπιος· ὅτε γέγονα ἀνὴρ, κατήργηκα τὰ τοῦ νηπίου. 13.12 βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον· ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην. 13.13 νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα· μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη.

twelve leads up to chapter thirteen; chapter thirteen then lays the foundation for the discussion in chapter fourteen on spiritual gifts. Paul's thought pattern stresses that genuine Christian love stands as the solution to the problems the Corinthians were experiencing with spiritual gifts. In part this grows out of what Paul had already said as axiomatic principle in 8:1 regarding eating food offered to idols: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (ἡ γνῶσις φυσιοῖ, ἡ δὲ ἀγάπη οἰκοδομεῖ). This is also related to one of his final admonitions in 16:14: "Let all that you do be done in love." (πάντα ὑμῶν ἐν ἀγάπῃ γινέσθω).

Thus the importance of Christian love is paramount. It is to color and pervade everything we do in devotion and service to Christ. The use of God's 'grace gift' (χαρίσμα) then must be carried out in love. Love is the life-blood of authentic Christian service and devotion. Without it what we do for God in service to others loses genuineness and potential to make a lasting difference. Certainly it won't be blessed by God. So then, it becomes critical to understand the nature of Christian love, which is radically different from the supposed love advocated by the world around us.

The thought flow of chapter thirteen on love naturally revolves around three central emphases, as Paul has arranged his ideas: Love's 1) importance (vv. 1-3), 2) stance (vv. 4-7), and 3) endurance (vv. 8-13). Now, let's take a look at what the apostle has to say.

## BODY

### I. Love's Importance, vv. 1-3

12.31b And I will show you a still more excellent way. 1 **If** I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 **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 do not have love, I am nothing. 3 **If** I give away all my possessions, and **if** I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>4</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Καὶ ἔτι καθ' ὑπερβολὴν ὁδὸν ὑμῖν δείκνυμι. 13.1 Ἐὰν ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαλῶ καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, γέγονα χαλκὸς ἤχων ἢ κύμβαλον ἀλαλάζον. 13.2 καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω προφητείαν καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθέν εἰμι. 13.3 κἂν ψωμίσω πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντά μου καὶ ἐὰν παραδῶ τὸ σῶμά μου ἵνα καυχῶμαι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐδὲν ὠφελοῦμαι.

First, we need to recognize the way this material is introduced in 12:31b. This defines the contextual setting for chapter thirteen. Love is seen as a much superior way to how the Corinthians were handling spiritual gifts. Their use of gifts, especially the speaking in tongues, had encouraged elitism and arrogance. Along with this had come divisiveness and tensions. Paul knew that correct understanding of both spiritual gifts and how they were to be used would not be sufficient to solve the problems at Corinth. The informational aspect is, to be sure, set forth here: Christian love is the only workable solution. But knowing it and applying it are two different things. Certainly this remains true for us today just as much as it was for the first century Christians at Corinth. Christian service apart from flowing out of love turns into something unlovely and more destructive than beneficial.

**WHAT IF...** Paul begins with a series of five 'what if' situations. Most English translations rendered the Greek conjunction introducing each clause ἐὰν as "if." There existed different kinds of "ifs" in ancient Greek. This particular pattern (called third class conditional protasis) doesn't assume that Paul is going to do this, or that the "what ifs" are going to happen in his regard. Instead, he sets up hypothetical possibilities, primarily for illustrative purposes.

1) Ἐὰν ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαλῶ καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, ..."

In this context, Paul begins with the spiritual gift that the Corinthians had elevated to the top of the list in importance: glossolalia. That Paul means "tongues" rather than intelligible language is confirmed by the similar expression in 14:18-19, "18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; 19 nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue." The combination "of mortals and of angels" is best understood as a twofold description of one activity: angels speaking through human voices.

2) καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω προφητείαν καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι, "And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,..."

The second "what if" situation goes back to preaching and prophecy, which Paul in chapter fourteen will rate as the number one spiritual gift in his list. The ability to speak God's words through a human voice to others in order to inform them about God's will and intention is προφητεία (prophecy). It relates to deep understanding of things not understood by average people (τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν). This then is closely connected to unreserved commitment to Christ (πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι). This depiction is of an individual extraordinarily gifted for ministry to others in preaching the Gospel.

3) κἂν ψωμίσω πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντά μου καὶ ἐὰν παραδῶ τὸ σῶμά μου ἵνα καυχῶμαι, "If I give away

<sup>4</sup>Other ancient authorities read *body to be burned*

all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, ...”

The third depiction is of way above average commitment to Christ and ministry at two levels: a) *ψωμίσω πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντά μου (I give away all my possessions)* and b) *παραδῶ τὸ σῶμά μου ἵνα καυχῶμαι (I hand over my body so that I may boast)*.

This last phrase is uncertain in the Greek. An alternative reading, with some variations, is *ἵνα καιθη-σώμαι / καιθήσομαι* (“so that I might / will be burned”). Just two letters make the difference in the spelling of the verb: -υχ- or -ιθ-. So it’s not hard to see why the variations surfaced in the process of copying the biblical text. The surface level meaning shifts from “bragging” to “martyrdom.” In the patristic era of copying (first 8 centuries) the tendency was to favor the latter reading because of severe persecution of Christians. But both the external and internal evidence slightly favors the first reading: “so that I might brag (about my superior gifts).” This certainly fits the context of the arrogance of the Corinthians about their gifts.

The picture painted here is of unselfish generosity and self-sacrifice in ministry to others. Paul’s life certainly did exemplify such a model. Eventually, even the martyrdom reading would prove accurate when about a decade after writing this the apostle would be executed by the Roman government because of his Christian commitment.

In each of these three scenarios Paul paints a “what if” picture of extraordinary Christian commitment and ministry.

The **one exactly repeated phrase in all three scenarios** is *ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω*, (“but I do not have love”). Thus Paul dramatically sets up the negative zinger in these “what if” situations. Extraordinary giftedness for ministry without Christian love means the giftedness is worthless and useless. The *ἀγάπη* kind of love Paul stresses here denotes self-sacrificial commitment both to Jesus and to others. Its ultimate example for Paul is Christ’s giving of himself to the church ([Eph. 4:25-27](#)):

*25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, 27 so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind? Yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.*

Not only husbands, but all believers find proper definition of love in the example set by Christ in his death on the cross. This gives a whole new perspective to love. Love is not a warm feeling toward someone, as the world around defines it. Love is not a ‘live and let live’ attitude toward others that refuses to rebuke and confront, as the world around us says. In the model and definition of love set by Jesus on the cross, love is commitment that puts attention on the other person rather than on itself. It reaches out sacrificially to do what ever necessary to help the other person, ‘to make that person holy and spotless.’ Love is strong and tough, not weak and namby pamby.

To love like this takes more strength and commitment than we humans possess within ourselves. We can only love like this through God’s love present and flowing into and out of our lives. Only in Christ can you love the way God requires you to love.

**THEN WHAT?** What happens when love is missing? The main clauses, drawing a conclusion from each of these three “what if” sentences spell it out clearly:

**1) γέγονα χαλκὸς ἢ χῶν ἢ κύμβαλον ἀλαλάζον (I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal).**

The heavenly speech focus in the first situation has biting tones. To speak the language of angels without love is to reduce Christian worship to the noisy, empty worship of the pagan cults that functioned in and around Corinth. The loud, emotionally charged style of worship typified most of the mystery religions, and often the more traditional religions of both the Greeks and Romans. With their strong emphasis upon glos-solalia as well, their worship became a combination of using loud noise making musical instruments to whip everyone into a frenzied state so that they could speak the language of the gods. Paul declares that tongues speaking without love turns Christian worship into paganism. This had sharp tones of condemnation of the practices in the Christian communities at Corinth.

**2) οὐθέν εἰμι (I am nothing).**

To possess such extraordinary spiritual insight would and could lead to the conclusion that this person is unusually special and distinct from everyone else in the spiritual community. But Paul’s conclusion is the opposite. Without love all this spiritual giftedness for preaching God’s word reduces the individual down to a position “lower than a snake’s belly.”

**3) οὐδὲν ὠφελοῦμαι (I gain nothing).**

Despite unbelievable generosity and self-sacrifice, without love the individual has achieved absolutely nothing spiritually. He may have his name on university buildings, placards on stained glass windows at church, and be known for his self-giving. But without Christian love, such a person has achieved absolutely nothing before God.

What a way to introduce the importance of love! Paul paints a dramatic picture here, using himself as the negative example. All three “what ifs” could have been accurately applied to the life and ministry of the apostle. So Paul wasn’t talking in terms that would have seemed unconnected to reality for the first readers of this text. But in using himself and injecting in the possibility of love not being the guiding point of this giftedness, he drew shocking conclusions. This forced the Corinthians to wrestle with just how much love guided their less gifted actions and ministries.

And it should have the same impact upon us as twenty-first century readers! Love indeed is to be the



theme as the old hymn declares:<sup>5</sup>

Of the themes that men have known,  
One supremely stands alone;  
Thro' the ages it has shown,  
'Tis His wonderful, wonderful love.  
Love is the theme, love is supreme;  
Sweeter it grows, glory bestows;  
Bright as the sun ever it glows!  
Love is the theme, eternal theme!

## II. Love's Stance, vv. 4-7

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

13.4 Ἡ ἀγάπη μακροθυμεῖ, χρηστεύεται ἡ ἀγάπη, οὐ ζηλοῖ, [ἡ ἀγάπη] οὐ περπερεύεται, οὐ φυσιοῦται, 13.5 οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖ, οὐ ζητεῖ τὰ ἑαυτῆς, οὐ παροξύνεται, οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν, 13.6 οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· 13.7 πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει.

This second block of material has three subsections: **1) positive traits** (v.4a); **2) absence of negative traits** (vv. 4b-6); **3) positive traits** (v. 7). Tucked between 2) and 3) is an antithetical parallelism, using joy as the common link: “not joy in this but joy in that.” This sets up the transition from the negative list 2 to the positive list 3. The first two traits in v. 4a are attitudes or stances with implied action. These are followed by two lists that have strong action orientation (vv. 4b-6 and v. 7). In so structuring these traits Paul goes from positive to negative and back to positive. Also, he stresses love as both posture and actions. In all of them, relationship with others is foundational. Grasping this is important to understanding what Paul means by love.

The *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* also calls attention to how these traits relate to stated problems in the church that surface in this letter:

**Note how these descriptions relate to the Corinthians' problems: jealousy (3:3); bragging (4:7); arrogance (4:6); seeking their own (10:24); taking wrong into account (6:7); rejoicing in unrighteousness (5:2).**

Thus the apostle doesn't just pick traits out of thin air to catalogue here. There is intentional application to the situation of his initial readers.

**1) Positive traits: “Love is patient; love is kind”** (Ἡ ἀγάπη μακροθυμεῖ, χρηστεύεται ἡ ἀγάπη).

Two word groups in ancient Greek are usually associated with the English idea of patience: a) μακροθυμία (μακροθυμέω, μακροθύμῳ) and b) ὑπομονή (ὑπομένω). Other Greek expressions relate but these are the two primary ones. The μακροθυμ- word group connotes patience with the sense of long-suffering or willingness to put up with a lot of stuff before taking action. The second word group ὑπομον- highlights patience in the sense of holding up under the burden of stuff being dumped on you. Paul here uses the verb from the first word group μακροθυμία giving love the character of being willing to put up with a lot of stuff.

**James 5:7-8** helps define and illustrate this concept through the use of the same word group:

**7 Be patient** [μακροθυμήσατε], **therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient** [μακροθυμῶν **with it until it receives the early and the late rains.** **8 You also must be patient** [μακροθυμήσατε]. **Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.**

Paul makes love a “person” in his treatment: “love is patient,” making it a model to be followed. Love is like this; so if we possess love, we will strive to be this way.

Paul will link the idea of patience to both words with the verbs from each word group in this section (μακροθυμεῖ in v. 4, and ὑπομένει in v. 7), and they are the only uses of either word group in the entire letter. The use of these two verbs serve literarily as boundary markers, being the first and last assertions of the section.

The second positive trait is *χρηστεύεται*. This Greek verb ascribes to love the quality of gentleness and kindness. This is the only use of this verb in the entire NT, although the adjective and noun forms are relatively common (some 17 times) in the NT, as A. C. Thiselton (*New International Greek Testament Commentary*) explains:

**The cognate noun χρηστότης, kindness, generosity, uprightness, however, occurs regularly along with the adjective in Hellenistic literature. Hence (a) there is no doubt about the meaning of the verb; and (b) the choice of the dynamic verbal form is deliberate, even if only to play its part in a chain of**



<sup>5</sup>Baptist Hymnal, 1991 edition: number 545.

active temporal processes. Spicq observes that the word “suggests the warm, generous welcome the Christian always gives his brothers ... does his utmost to be thoughtful, helpful and kind, always in a pleasant way ... , and confirms the element of magnanimity in **agape**.”<sup>102</sup> In his commentary on this verse Origen expounds the verb as showing “sweetness to all persons” (γλυκτὸς πρὸς παντὰς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους).<sup>103</sup> Chrysostom perceives **love** here as that which breaks the spiral of passion, anger, and resentment by **showing kindness**: “not only by enduring nobly, but also by soothing and comforting do they cure the sore and heal the wound of passion.”<sup>104</sup>

This combination of qualities defines love in terms of how it reacts positively to negative things thrown against it.

**2) Negative traits:** “love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing,” (οὐ ζηλοῖ, [ἡ ἀγάπη] οὐ περπερεύεται, οὐ φυσιοῦται, οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖ, οὐ ζητεῖ τὰ ἑαυτῆς, οὐ παροξύνεται, οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν, οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ.).

The next list (vv. 4b-5) of seven traits defines reactions that love will avoid making against negative things thrown against it.

These are a) envy, b) boasting, c) arrogance, d) rudeness, e) self-centeredness, f) irritability, g) resentment. These traits are structured in verb action moving the ideas from attitudes to concrete actions. Both the NRSV and the NLT mistakenly obscure this with their translations. The NASB retains the Greek text more accurately with “love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered...” The second trait is more action oriented than even the NASB implies, and οὐ περπερεύεται could be better translated as “Love doesn’t strut,” as the Message renders it. In surveying a dozen or so English translations, most do a very poor job in preserving the action orientation of these seven negative qualities. By shifting these Greek expressions into passive traits (“X does not...” to “X is not...”) much of the forcefulness of Paul’s words is lost.

Also implied in Paul’s expression is that the positive side of these verbs does characterize love as an active action oriented quality. For example, love doesn’t brag about itself; rather, it heaps praise on others. It doesn’t swell up its head about itself; instead, it builds up others with a sense of their accomplishment et al.

As if to reinforce this picture, Paul sets up a summarizing parallel at the end, which transitions from this list to the next one around the idea of rejoicing: οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ. Opposites are set up: not this but that. The common action is to rejoice, to express joy and excitement. And this not in a momentary expression, but as an ongoing action (present tense in the Greek). The two opposite situations that occasion avoidance and expression of joy are ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ and τῇ ἀληθείᾳ.

Here is where the thoughts become more complex. Although ἀδικία can mean injustice or unrighteousness in a broad definition, the contextual limitations here strongly suggest that Paul primarily has in mind the wrongful actions already listed in the church at Corinth, the most grievous being the immoral actions of the man living in sexual relations with his birth mother (1 Cor. 5:1-13). The Greek noun usually implies hurtful or destructive impact of an action, and it sometimes translated an “injury.” Putting all this together, it seems that Paul declares that love doesn’t gloat over other people’s wrong, hurtful actions.

The opposite side of this contrast is συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ. Neither the NASB (“rejoices with the truth”) nor the NRSV (“rejoices in the truth”) fully capture the sense of this expression. Instead, the NLT comes closer with its “rejoices whenever the truth wins out.” How does truth “win out” in the contextual setting here? Quite clearly, the base line reference would be if the Corinthians took to heart the correctness of Paul’s admonitions and put them into practice. Their problems would find resolution and spiritual health would return to the communities of faith in Corinth. To take ἡ ἀλήθεια as some grand abstract concept is not what Paul intended. Rather, he has in mind the Gospel, at its implication for moral behavior, as the essence of that which is consistent with God’s character. Love will always celebrate when people’s lives start lining up with God’s character.

**3) Positive traits:** “but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει.).

The third list (v. 7) returns to the positive emphasis, but retains the action orientation of verb expression: πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει. **Love does four things**, as lined out here. a) It bears all things (πάντα στέγει). b) It believes all things (πάντα πιστεύει). c) It hopes all things (πάντα ἐλπίζει). d) It endures all things (πάντα ὑπομένει). The “all things” (πάντα) is set at the front of each statement for emphasis.

J. Paul Sampley (*NIB*, iPreach) effectively summarizes:

Then with considerable rhetorical flourish Paul concludes the characterization of love by a string of most sweeping claims about love, each beginning with the direct object (παντα panta, “all things”), thereby emphasizing love’s all-encompassing scope. The “all things” list opens and closes with very nearly the same point about how love functions in the present, thus highlighting these two claims: “Love passes over all things in silence” (v. 7a) and “Love bears

[or endures] all things” (v. 7d). On one level these assertions are positive counterparts to the disclaimer that love does not keep track of wrongs; they represent the necessary kind of “running forgiveness” that is ingredient to any sustained relationship. On another level they establish love as the context in which the difficulties and trials of life are met. How do they do so? Because love is never held alone in one’s self; love always involves another; love always links one’s self to another. This reciprocal character of love has already been acknowledged by Paul in 8:3: “If someone loves God, that person is known by God.” Love is a two-way street that provides a context of mutuality, understanding, and relatedness between each person and others, between God and believers, and between believers and believers. And that is the context in which love enables us, with the support of the others who are linked in love, to bear, to endure whatever comes along. This is the same point he already made in 10:13, but this time expressed in terms of love.



The other two claims of v. 7—“love believes all things; hopes all things”—tie faith and hope to love in anticipation of v. 13. It is not surprising that faith (the same Greek term for the verb “believe”) and hope should appear here together; they are inextricably tied in Paul’s thought (cf. Gal 5:5-6; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8). Faith, right relationship with God, is the basis on which one has hope regarding the future, because, through faith, one knows God’s redemption in the present, one can hope—that is, one can confidently look to the future in anticipation of God’s completing the work that God has already begun in the present (cf. Phil 2:12b-13).

Although Paul was addressing a particular situation at Corinth in the mid-first century, the connections of these words to us today is not complicated. Love is powerful, not weak. Love is action, not passive. Love focuses on others, not itself. Love functions in the context of a triad of commitment with faith and hope. Together they bring God’s powerful presence into the mixture invigorating love’s potency for good even in the midst of evil.

One of the most thought provoking representations of faith, hope and love, in the graphics search for this lesson, is the one on the right. These three qualities are represented by three young boys. Love is in the center feeding a fourth child. The theme is productivity with the harvest symbol in the background. It captures a major point of Paul’s emphasis here.

### III. Love’s Endurance, vv. 8-13

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>6</sup> F66 but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

13.8 Ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε πίπτει· εἴτε δὲ προφητεῖαι, καταργηθήσονται· εἴτε γλώσσαι, παύσονται· εἴτε γνώσις, καταργηθήσεται. 13.9 ἐκ μέρους γὰρ γινώσκομεν καὶ ἐκ μέρους προφητεύομεν· 13.10 ὅταν δὲ ἔλθῃ τὸ τέλειον, τὸ ἐκ μέρους καταργηθήσεται. 13.11 ὅτε ἤμην νήπιος, ἐλάλουν ὡς νήπιος, ἐφρόνουν ὡς νήπιος, ἐλογιζόμην ὡς νήπιος· ὅτε γέγονα ἀνὴρ, κατήργηκα τὰ τοῦ νηπίου. 13.12 βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι’ ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον· ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην. 13.13 νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα· μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη.

This final section is focused on limitations -- in this life, over against eternity in Heaven with God. Love is the only thing to transcend both these realms. Faith and hope are limited to this life, but become unneeded in the eternal order. Communicating directly with God in tongues and communicating the truths of God to others have a role in this life, but become unnecessary in the eternal order. Our comprehension of things in this life, both spiritually and otherwise, is limited. But those limits are removed in the eternal order. This life is like childhood while the eternal order compares to adulthood. What we grasp in this life is like looking into an ancient mirror that reflects back a very low level image. In the eternal order, those limits are gone.

Paul’s rhetorical structure changes in verses 8-12. Two sections [1 & 2] with two subsections surface. The subset [a & b] in each larger section is causal. That is, each subset provides a basis for preceding subset. This can be illustrated as:

- 1) **First set of assertions (v. 8)**
  - a) **The basis for these (vv. 9-10)**
- 2) **Second set of assertions (v. 11)**
  - b) **The basis for these (v. 12)**

Verse 13 is summary to the entire passage.

The second set (vv. 11-12) serves to reinforces the first set through analogy, rather than introduce a

<sup>6</sup>Gk *in a riddle*.



completely new idea about love. Its focus, instead, is on the limitations part in the first set of assertions.

1) Paul begins with “Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.” Thieselton (*NIGTC*) correctly calls attention to the weakness of most English translations of the first verb here, πίπτει:

Since Paul has consciously used images and metaphors of burning or boiling, inflating, bad manners, having a sharp point stuck into one, and reckoning up accounts, it seems a pity to reduce πίπτω, *to fall down, to fall to the ground, to collapse, to fall apart*, of its grounding in physical, pictorial imagery by the abstract *fails* (NIV) or *faileth* (AV/KJV, RV) or even *comes to an end* (REB, NJB) or *ends* (NRSV).

The powerful assertion is that love can weather every storm and won't collapse. The emphatic negative οὐδέποτε means “not ever at any moment in time.” Love's strength and stamina is unmatched. This is placed in contrast to prophecies, tongues, and knowledge. Both prophecies and knowledge will become irrelevant or rendered useless (καταργηθήσονται [plural] / καταργηθήσεται [singular]), while tongues will cease functioning (παύσονται). The precise meaning of the latter is sometimes debated. Sometimes an anti-glossolalia stance reads into this a view that tongues speaking stopped with the end of the apostolic age. But the Pauline context here is clear. The termination point for all three is the transition from the earthly to the heavenly, not some earthly point beforehand, as he makes clear in the latter part of his rationale for these assertions in v. 10 below.

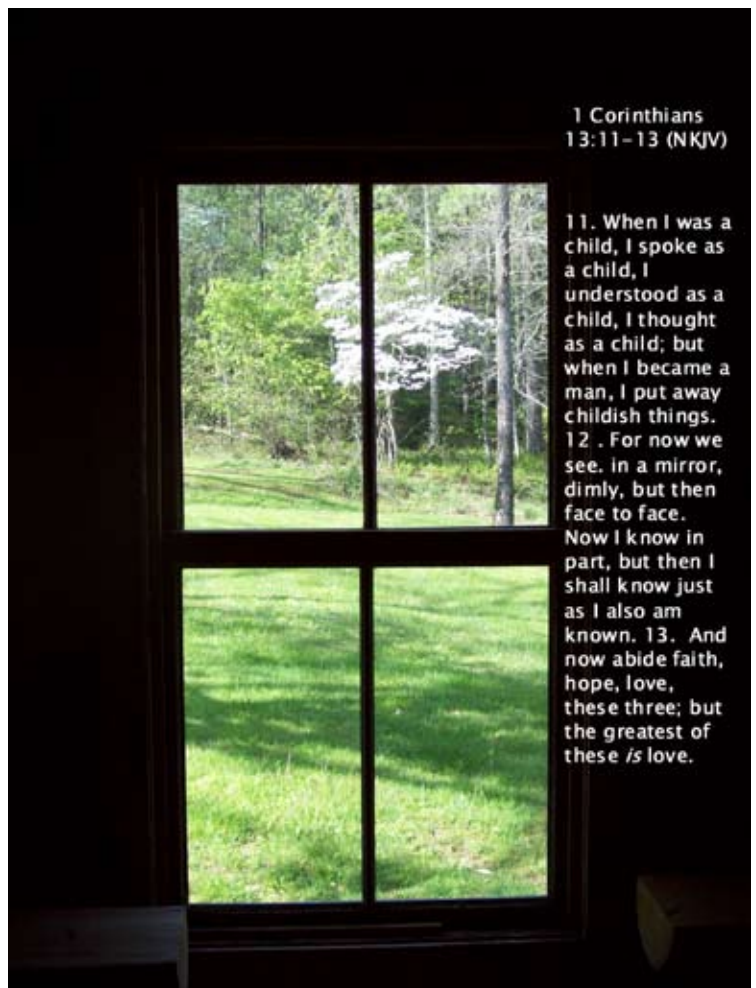
a) The reason for the limitation of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge is given in verses nine and ten: “**For** [γὰρ] **we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.**” Limitations are present on these gifts, the limitations that come from inside this life and from the fact that these gifts have value only in this life. Interestingly, limitations in the causal statement are not directly stated about tongues. That will come in his discussion in chapter 14, and the limitations are more severe than those on prophecies and knowledge. The shift point is the transition from the earthly to the heavenly in verse 10. The partial will be rendered irrelevant, just like the prophecies and knowledge above; note the very same verb καταργηθήσεται. What is the meaning of this shift? It is a movement from τὸ ἐκ μέρους (the partial) to τὸ τέλειον (the complete). The eschatological end of human history at the return of Christ is Paul's point.

Paul's primary point is that no such limitations are placed on love. It stands pat in that transition shift while the other gifts don't survive it.

2) The second set of assertions is in verse eleven: “*When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.*” This set doesn't add new information to the stress on love's permanency. Instead, it reinforces one point of the first set through an analogy: the experience of limitations in childhood contrasted to the release from those limitations in adulthood. Notice also, that Paul returns to the first person “I” using himself as the example. This, as he did at the outset in vv. 1-3.

The areas of childhood limitations are identified as speaking (ἐλάλουν), thinking (ἐφρόνου), and reasoning (ἐλογιζόμεν). Although three areas of limitations are mentioned here, along with three areas of limitation in the first set in verse eight (prophecies, tongues, and knowledge), I'm not sure these two sets of threes should be lined up in parallel to each other. But the temptation to do so is certainly present. Prophecies equals speaking; tongues equals thinking; and knowledge equals reasoning. The problem with this lineup seems to be associating tongues with thinking. Tongues, as Paul views it, is taking leave of rational thought processes. Some biblical scholars want to reverse the sequence of the first two so that tongues is linked to speaking, and thinking is linked to prophecies. But both tongues and prophecies have more to do with speaking than with reasoning. The second (thinking) and third (reasoning) limitations in the childhood set both have to do with mental processes, and thus could more easily with linked to knowledge in the first set.

All to say, that trying to link each set of three limitations in a one-to-one connection just won't



work. Thus, it's far better to see each set as self-contained. The childhood limitations are those most natural to childhood, not some kind of hidden symbol of the spiritual gifts issue in the first set of limitations.

The shift point in this second set of limitations in verse 11 is the move into adulthood. Here τὰ τοῦ νηπίου (the things of childhood) means κατήρηκα (I put an end to) when γέγονα ἀνὴρ (I became an adult). Several issues arise from English translation patterns. The shift point translation of γέγονα ἀνὴρ is not handled very well by any of the three translations: "when I became a man" (NASB); "when I became an adult" (NRSV); "when I grew up" (NLT). The use of the perfect tense in the Greek expression conveys the idea of "when I settled into manhood." In the cultural context of Paul's day, that had slightly different meanings. In the Jewish culture, it meant one's 30th birthday and much celebration of arriving into adulthood, which was a synonym for "marriageability'." In the Greco-Roman culture, it meant the date predetermined by daddy, usually sometime in the late 20s. Similar celebrations and meanings were attached here. Basically, entrance into adulthood meant one was deemed to be ready for the responsibilities of establishing his own family.

The idea that this shift into adulthood meant "put away" can be misleading. This shift point κατήρηκα is defined by the exact same verb used in the first shift point (v. 10), καταργηθήσεται. The difference in the spellings is the difference between perfect tense - active voice here, and future tense - passive voice in the former. This is dictated by the nature of the two statements. The first one looks to the future when God will render these limitations irrelevant. This second one here looks to the past in Paul's life in the analogy of his move into adulthood. Especially, troublesome is the inherently negative "childish ways" (NRSV) or "childish things" (NASB) translation of the Greek τὰ τοῦ νηπίου. This injects a pejorative tone into the analogy that isn't present in the Greek, which simply means "the things I did in childhood." Paul's point in the analogy is limitations period. Not necessarily "stupid things." Speaking, thinking and reasoning -- the childhood things the reference goes back to -- are not inherently bad things. They are just subject to the limited ability of childhood. Keep in mind also, the term νήπιος technically means "the period before adulthood," that is, being a minor. In Greek, "childhood" means either βρεφός or παιδίον, not νήπιος from a technical standpoint. The English term "childhood" is probably used because our culture has childhood, youth, and adulthood phases, and the terms minor/adult wouldn't sound as natural.

Paul then strengthens his first set of assertions about the contrast between love and other spiritual gifts at the point of limitations on the others. He does so by looking to the past and finding an analogy between childhood and adulthood with the shift point allowing for dramatic setting aside of limitations. For a somewhat similar analogy for faith and salvation as the shift point see [Galatians 6:1-7](#),

1 Let me show you the implications of this. As long as the heir is a minor [νήπιος], he has no advantage over the slave. Though legally he owns the entire inheritance, 2 he is subject to tutors and administrators until whatever date the father has set for emancipation. 3 That is the way it is with us: When we were minors [νήπιοι], we were just like slaves ordered around by simple instructions (the tutors and administrators of this world), with no say in the conduct of our own lives. 4 But when the time arrived that was set by God the Father, God sent his Son, born among us of a woman, born under the conditions of the law so that he might redeem those of us who have been kidnapped by the law. 5 Thus we have been set free to experience our rightful heritage. 6 You can tell for sure that you are now fully adopted as his own children because God sent the Spirit of his Son into our lives crying out, "Papa! Father!" 7 Doesn't that privilege of intimate conversation with God make it plain that you are not a slave, but a child? And if you are a child, you're also an heir, with complete access to the inheritance.

b) The rationale for this analogy to childhood is set forth in verse twelve: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Two parallel statements form the basis for the emphasis on childhood limitations and what passage into adulthood implies: a) see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; b) now knowing only in part, but then will know fully. At first this doesn't seem to fit. But Paul does a frequent Pauline thing. His rationale here doesn't point the appeal to childhood only. Rather it moves largely to justifying the spiritual point of his appeal to childhood. His childhood analogy in the past pointed applicationally to an eschatological shift in the future. Note the repeated adverbs in both sets ἄρτι...τότε (now...then). More precisely, ἄρτι has the possible meaning of immediate past, and would fit better in such a contrast between childhood (ἄρτι) / adulthood (τότε) than the adverb νυνὶ used in verse 13, which is limited emphatically to present time. Thus, his expressed basis for the analogy picks up limited seeing and knowing in childhood to more complete seeing and knowing in adulthood. But the language of his rationale is much more influenced by the eschatological application of its point.

In part also, his rationale here becomes his elaboration of the shift





point in the first rationale (v. 10): when that which is complete comes (ὅταν δὲ ἔλθῃ τὸ τέλειον,...). There the emphasis was on rendering irrelevant the limitations of the earthly (τὸ ἐκ μέρους). Here the emphasis first is on “seeing.” Now it is limited seeing; then, it will be complete seeing. Second, the contrast is on limited knowing now over against fully knowing then. The ἐκ μέρους language is repeated with the knowing element.

The distance of the shift is the dramatically new element in this second rationale. Just the release from limitations was emphasized in the first rationale (τὸ ἐκ μέρους καταργηθήσεται). Here the shift goes from *seeing* dimly in a mirror to *seeing* God face to face, and from *knowing* in part to *knowing* as fully as God knows us. Also, interesting is the sequencing of the two grounds for release from limitations. In the first it is knowing then prophesying; in the second it is seeing then knowing, thus creating a chiasmic *abb’a*’ sequence.

Verse 13 brings the entire passage to climax. The triad of faith, hope and love come together as the lasting elements of this earthly time (now; νυνὶ). But if one has to prioritize these three, love stands at the top of the list. One should not read into the verb μένει here the eschatological implication that these three entities survive for all eternity, in spite of Paul’s earlier contention that only love survives the shift point from this life to eternity. This is the mistake of the NASB and NRSV translations. The better understanding is that these three come to the top of the list in this present earthly situation. Love rises to the top of this short list because it alone continues into the heavenly life.



### CONCLUSION

Wow! This is love! Genuine Christian love! Nothing like it exists in the pagan world around us. Through this amazing, unbelievable powerful force called love we serve God and minister to others. It must permeate our every action, every word, every relationship. Otherwise, what we do counts for nothing. No matter how gifted we may be from God, for those gifts to be authentic channels of service they must flow through the pipeline of this love.

This is nothing less than God’s love present and alive in us! It’s not our own love. It’s not something we conjure up and show. No, it is divine love planted in us at salvation and brought alive through the Holy Spirit’s leadership of our lives.

Can you love like this? Only through Christ! Come to Him today and discover His love for you. Then let that love take root in your life and enable you to love others in the love of Christ!