

THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY 1 CORINTHIANS 12:31-13:13

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This chapter continues Paul's discussion of three aspects of worship: 1) head coverings for women (11:2-16); 2) the Lord's Supper (11:17-34); and 3) the gifts of the Holy Spirit (12:1-14:40). Up to this point in his discussion of the Holy Spirit's gifts, Paul established that there are many gifts in the church, all of which are important (12:1-30). Here, he turned his attention to the greatest gift that God gives the church, namely love.

Paul's discussion of love divides into four parts: an introduction (12:31); the priority of love (13:1-3); the characteristics of love (13:4-7); and the superiority of love (13:8-13). This material focuses on a theme found throughout Paul's discussion of worship (12:1-14:40) by developing the theme of the edification of others (see 12:1,7,25; 14:3,4,5,12,17,19,26).

INTRODUCTION (12:31)

The apostle closed the last chapter and opened this one with a statement that would carry through the entirety of chapter 13. He told the Corinthians that they should **eagerly desire the greater gifts** (12:31). The original language is ambiguous at this point. Some interpreters have suggested that Paul stated a fact ("but you are eagerly desiring the greater gifts"), and then rebuked the Corinthians for this fact in chapter 13. This interpretation seems unlikely because in this same context he encouraged the Corinthians to desire spiritual gifts (14:1) and prophecy (14:39). Moreover, 13:13 indicates that love is "the greatest" of all things to be desired. This verse is better seen to introduce the positive pursuit of greater gifts. Paul was about to show the Corinthians **the most excellent way** to live as a member of the body of Christ (12:31).

It would be difficult to overemphasize Paul's commitment to love among Christians. The principle of love for others guided his discussion of worship (12:1-14:40). He urged believers to restrict their freedoms for the sake of others (8:1-11:1). He argued that concern for their husband's honor should guide wives' behavior (11:2-16), and told rich believers to make sure the poor received the Lord's Supper (11:17-34). In this verse, he introduced the same concern in an even more dramatic way. The pursuit and exercise of spiritual gifts must be bathed in love for others. This is **the most excellent way** (12:31).

PRIORITY OF LOVE (13:1-3)

In a series of extraordinary hyperboles, Paul expressed his utter commitment to the priority of love over other aspects of life in the Spirit. He described five different hypothetical situations (the NIV omits one use of “if” in the Greek text of 13:3; compare “if I deliver my body . . .” NASB; “if I hand over my body . . .” NRSV; “if I give my body . . .” NKJV) in which he might display tremendous blessing or devotion, and imagined the value of these without Christian love. In each case, he utterly devalued these blessings and devotions in love’s absence.

13:1. First, Paul touched the issue of speaking in **tongues**. This issue topped his list because of the overemphasis some Corinthians had placed on this gift of the Spirit. He described the gift here uniquely as **tongues of men and of angels**. The grammatical construction of the original language does not indicate that Paul was claiming to have done this. He spoke entirely hypothetically, without reference to whether or not he ever had done or would do any of these things. Obviously he had not surrendered his **body to the flames** as he said later. Further, neither he nor anyone else but the omniscient God ever had, could, or would **fathom all mysteries and all knowledge**. On the other hand, he did have the **gift of prophecy** (Acts 13:1; 16:9; 18:9-10; 27:10; 2 Cor. 12:1-4; 1 Thess. 4:15-17), and he did **speak in tongues** (14:18). Grammatically, no evidence exists that Paul believed it was possible to speak in the **tongues . . . of angels**, and nowhere else does the Bible provide actual evidence of such a possibility.

Even so, such an extraordinary gift would profit nothing without love. Paul put the matter in striking terms, confessing that without **love** accompanying such an extraordinary gift, he would merely amount to **a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal**. To be sure, he would make a lot of noise, but that would be all. His special gift, devoid of love, would amount to irritating, disruptive, and meaningless clamor. The shock to the Corinthian readers must have been tremendous when they read these words. Those who exalted themselves above others because of their gift of tongues must have looked like fools.

13:2. Second, Paul spoke of the **gift of prophecy**. Without a doubt Paul held this gift in high esteem. He recommended it as a useful and edifying gift (14:1-5,22-24,31). Here, however, he imagined the gift in a greater form than it had ever appeared in human history. Suppose he were to have the **gift of prophecy** to such a degree that he could **fathom all mysteries and all knowledge**. Prophets know things that are hidden from others because they receive revelation from God, but no prophet has ever known every hidden mystery. If Paul were to have such omniscience, it would have been astounding indeed. Yet, Paul was not impressed with the thought, concluding that without **love** he would be **nothing** even if he knew every divine secret. Such a magnificent ability has no value at all if it is not shaped and used in the service of love.

Third, Paul raised the gift of **faith**. In this case, he did not have in mind saving faith which every believer exercises (Luke 7:50; 8:12; John 3:16-18; Acts 15:11; 16:31; Rom. 3:26,28,30; 4:5-9; 5:1; 10:9,11; 1 Cor. 15:1-2; Gal. 2:16; 3:8,24,26; Eph. 2:8-9). Instead, he spoke of a special ability to trust and believe God to do great miracles. Paul describes this **faith** as the ability to **move mountains**. The allusion to Jesus' words is evident (Matt. 17:20; 21:21; Mark 11:23). It would be astonishing for Paul to have had the ability to move mountains through his faith. Nevertheless, even this dramatic ability would amount to **nothing** unless it were joined with **love** for others.

13:3. Fourth, Paul imagined himself giving **all** he possessed **to the poor**. This may allude to Jesus' words to the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22), or it may refer to the early church's practice of selling their possessions to feed the church (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35). Paul, however, was not wealthy, having either to work to support himself (Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 4:12; 9:4-15; 2 Cor. 11:8-9; 2 Thess. 3:8) or to subsist on gifts (Phil 4:16). So, he may not have intended this condition to represent the difficulty of giving away money that the very rich experience. He had already demonstrated his willingness to go hungry and homeless for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 4:11), and even to be beaten nearly to death (2 Cor. 11:23-27).

Parting with his money for the sake of the brethren he loved probably would not have been difficult for Paul. In all likelihood, he focused more on the benefit to others that such an act would produce. Surely, giving all to the poor would be an act that would have sufficient merit in itself. But Paul quickly asserted that this was not the case. Even such a tremendously beneficial act would profit him nothing if he did not do it for love. It is possible to give to the poor for all kinds of reasons: pride, guilt, self-righteousness, etc. (compare Acts 5:1-10). If such giving is not done for **love**, Paul said, "**I gain nothing.**"

Fifth, Paul closed his list of five hypothetical situations with the ultimate sacrifice. He imagined that he might **surrender** his **body to the flames**. Some textual evidence supports an alternative reading followed by the NRSV: "hand over my body so that I may boast" (see also NIV margin). It is difficult to know precisely what Paul had in mind here. It seems most likely that he imagined a situation of religious persecution in which he would be called upon to die. Surely, such a sacrifice would be meritorious enough to stand on its own. If the marginal reading is correct (see NRSV), Paul may have thought of his own trials and persecutions short of death (1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 11:23-27). In either case, Paul refused to relent from the priority of love. The words, "**I gain nothing,**" may apply to one situation as well as to the other.

Throughout this portion of the chapter Paul, addressed several extremely hypothetical situations. He chose scenarios in which he might do the most remarkable things imaginable. What would be the value not of ordinary tongues but **tongues of men and of angels, prophecy** that could **fathom all, faith** that could **move mountains**, giving **all to the poor**, and even the **surrender** of the **body** to death? It seems commonsensical that these experiences have intrinsic value. But Paul's

response was astounding – without Christian love, these experiences amount to **nothing**, just like the one who performs them.

It should not be surprising that Paul put such a high premium on Christians' love for each other. He simply followed Jesus who placed "love your neighbor as yourself" second only to "love the Lord your God" (Matt. 22:37-40). The command to love each other is the second most important law of Scripture. It is no wonder Paul argued that without love for others all Spiritual gifts are practically worthless.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LOVE (13:4-7)

This text is surely among the best known portions of Paul's writings: his definition of love. Although his focus here was on love between brothers and sisters in Christ, this passage lists fourteen characteristics of love that apply to many other human relations as well. Two positive descriptions begin the list (14:4a), followed by eight negative qualifications (14:4b-6), and a rapid list of four more positive qualifications closes the material (14:7). In a day when people largely define love in terms of sexual passion or sentimentality, Paul's words stand as a positive corrective.

Despite the fact that this passage broadly applies to a variety of human experiences, one must not lose sight of Paul's particular point for the Corinthians. The church at Corinth was full of divisions and strife. Controversies raged over: allegiances to leaders, worldly standards, and a complete misconception of the church (1:10-4:21); sexual immorality (5:1-13; 6:12-20); lawsuits (6:1-11); marital relationships (7:1-40); freedom in Christ, care for others, and idolatry (8:1-11:1); dishonorable worship, including mistreatment of the poor (11:2-34); the value and use of spiritual gifts in the church (12:1-14:40); and the hope of future resurrection (15:1-58).

Paul's deep concern for the unity of the church at Corinth caused him to focus on certain aspects of Christian love and to omit others. It is always important to keep this limited focus in mind. For example, Paul wrote that love **always trusts** (13:7). This feature of love needed to be emphasized in Corinth where unjustified suspicions had arisen — but even Christ himself did not always trust people (John 2:24). At times, loving protection for people such as children means not trusting people who may abuse them. Love does not **always trust** without regard to circumstance. The limitations of this list must be kept in mind to avoid improperly universalizing the features of love mentioned here. Therefore, the characteristics of love should be investigated both positively and negatively by asking what they do not mean as well as what they mean.

13:4. Love is patient. Patience is a quality of love that the New Testament frequently mentions by this or closely related terminology (Matt. 5:38-48; 18:23-35; 2 Cor. 6:6; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12-14; 2 Tim. 2:24; 3:10; Jas. 1:19). It basically signifies forbearance, slowness to repay for offenses. Throughout the Scriptures God is described as patient because he does not immediately punish those who offend him

(Exod. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Neh. 9:17; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3; Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Tim. 1:16; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 3:9,15). God's patience slows down the judgment process and opens the way for reprieve from punishment altogether (Joel 2:12-14). Believers should behave similarly because of their love for each another. When an offense takes place, a loving Christian is slow to strike back. In fact, that forbearance becomes the opportunity for reconciliation and forgiveness. As the Corinthians disagreed with each other over many different issues, it was evident that they had to be patient in order to keep the church from disintegrating.

One must be careful, however, to distinguish patience from indifference. Patience bears with an offense, but indifference ignores it altogether. When an offense takes place that is harmful or destructive to oneself or to others, it must not be entirely overlooked. Paul, for instance, loved the Corinthians tremendously (4:14; 10:14; 15:58; 16:24). He patiently bore with them, but did not ignore their offenses (1:10-11; 4:18-21; 5:1-2,6; 6:1-5,15-17; 8:12; 11:17-22;14:26-29; 15:12; 16:22). Instead, he worked with them slowly and carefully to bring about the desired end of edification and the honor of Christ. Indifference does not imply a goal — patience does. While indifference may simply forget an issue, patience eventually runs out unless matters resolve positively. God is patient, but his patience can come to an end. Every judgment from God demonstrates this truth, with the ultimate end of his patience coming on the day of the Lord (Isa. 13:6,9; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:11; Obad. 1:15; Zeph. 2:1-3; 1 Thess. 5:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:1-10). In the same way, human patience must not become indifference.

Love . . . is kind. Paul also stressed that love demonstrates itself in kindness. The term “kindness” (*chrestotes*) appears many times in Paul's epistles (Rom. 2:4; 3:12; 11:22; 2 Cor. 6:6; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 2:7; Col. 3:12; Tit. 3:4). It is connected with patience again in Galatians 5:22 as a fruit of the Spirit apparently because these concepts are very similar. Probably, Paul's distinction between patience and kindness was similar to that of English speakers. Patience has more of a temporal focus, relating to taking time to deal with offenses. Kindness, in turn, has more to do with the manner in which one treats others. During times that require patience, love also deals generously and gently with offenders. To maintain the unity of the church in Corinth, Paul believed that its members had to be kind to each other.

Nevertheless, one must be careful to remember that kindness takes many forms. In general, it is soft and gentle. Occasionally, however, kindness must take the form of a careful rebuke designed to bring about a good result. Sometimes it is not kind at all to be soft-spoken about an offense. Paul demonstrated this as he dealt kindly, but firmly, with the Corinthians (4:21; 6:5; compare Gal. 3:1-3). Jesus' own life demonstrated that kindness sometimes takes the form of a well-placed rebuke (Matt. 15:7-9; Luke 13:15-17).

Love . . . does not envy. Envy (or jealousy) is admiration and desire gone astray. One may rightly admire another for something that person is or has, and he may rightly desire many of the same good things for himself. Jealousy and envy begin when

admiration and desire turn to resentment of others for the good they have. They are the attitudinal root of many terrible actions in the world. The Bible illustrates this time and again, most notably in the handing over of Jesus to Pilate (Matt. 27:18; Mark 15:10), but also in many other places (Gen. 37:11-36; Ps. 106:16; Acts 5:17-18; 7:9; 13:45; 17:5; Phil. 1:5; Jas. 4:2). James, in particular, wrote, "Where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice" (Jas. 3:16). The believers to whom Paul wrote apparently envied each other, and this envy became the source of divisions among them (3:3). Envy also seems to have motivated some Corinthians to defraud others of their property (6:7-8), and perhaps lay behind some Corinthians' feelings that they were not part of the body because they lacked certain gifts (12:15-16). To envy is not to display the love of Christ who gave up all for the sake of others (Phil. 2:3-8).

Love . . . does not boast. Paul's word for "boast" (*perpereuomai*) ("love does not parade itself" NKJV) appears only here in the New Testament, and extremely infrequently in the rest of Hellenistic literature. The meaning seems to be "bragging without foundation," and may also encompass sinful acts which Paul elsewhere called *kauchaomai*. The NIV also translates *kauchaomai* as "boast," but *kauchaomai* does not always carry a negative connotation (compare 1:31). Sinful bragging can be seen in the Corinthians claims to be "of Paul," "of Cephas," "of Apollos," and "of Christ" (1:12). Some members of the Corinthian church also wrongly exalted themselves on the basis of their gifts and abilities (3:18-21; 4:7), while the whole congregation evidently boasted in their tolerance of sin (5:1,6). Such behaviors do not show regard for the honor of others, nor for the glory of God.

At the same time, loving other people does not mean failing to acknowledge the good God has done in oneself and in others. Paul was not beyond complimenting the Corinthians (1:4-9; 6:11; 11:2). He even exerted his own standing on occasion (2:6-7; 4:1,16; 7:7; 9:1-27). He did not oppose acknowledging that they and he had done good things. Love does not mean lying about human accomplishments. Rather, it means not exalting oneself over others as if one's accomplishments were based on one's own merit and ability.

Love . . . is not proud ("arrogant" NASB, NRSV). To be proud is to be overly self-confident or inappropriately insubordinate to God and others. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments condemn pride as the source of much destruction and pain in the world (Deut. 8:11-14; 2 Chr. 25:19-24; 26:16-21; 32:25; Neh. 9:16-18; Job 40:11-12; Pss. 10:2-11; 86:14; 94:1-7; 119:69,78,85; 140:5; Prov. 11:2; 16:5,18; 21:4; 28:25; 29:23; Isa. 2:11-12; 3:16-17; 13:11; 28:1,3; Jer. 13:17; Ezek. 7:10-11,20; Dan. 5:20-21; Hos. 5:5; 7:10; 13:6; Amos 6:8; Mal. 3:13-15; Rom. 1:28-32; Jas. 3:14-16; 4:6,16; 1 Pet. 5:5; 2 Pet. 2:18-22; Jude 16). In Corinth some had become arrogant because of their tolerance of sin (5:2), their intellectual abilities (4:6-7,18-20; 8:1), and their apostolic associations (1:11-12). Others had become proud because of their spiritual gifts (12:21; 14:37). Here Paul warned that love is just the opposite of pride (compare 8:1). When

one cares about other people, he does not find himself full of self-importance or arrogance toward others.

While pride is the opposite of love, self-loathing is contrary to the will of God as well. Unfortunately, many Christians so wish to avoid pride that they actually fall into the trap of deprecating themselves. Whether in others or ourselves, the image of God must be held in high regard. Pride reproaches other images of God. Self-hatred reproaches oneself as the image of God.

13:5. Love . . . is not rude (“does not act unbecomingly” NASB). The word here translated “is not rude” is *aschemoneo*. It appears in the New Testament only one other time, and there refers to the postponement of marriage for an older woman (1 Cor. 7:36). The Septuagint uses the word four times to mean “be naked” (Ezek. 16:7,22,39; 23:29) and once to mean “degradation” for receiving a terrible beating (Deut. 25:3).

Its cognate noun *aschomosune* appears twice in the New Testament, once in reference to male homosexual acts (Rom. 1:27) and once regarding nakedness (Rev. 16:15). *Aschomosune* also appears not infrequently in the Septuagint. In Exodus, Leviticus, and the prophets, it means “nakedness,” with rather specific reference to genitalia (Exod. 20:26; 22:26; 28:42; Lev. 18:6-19; 20:11,17-21; 2:11; Lam. 1:8; Ezek. 16:8). In Deuteronomy it means “excrement” at least once (Deut. 23:14), while in Ezra 4:14 it merely denotes political disrepute. In the Genesis 34:7 (LXX), the adjective *aschemon* describes the rape of Dinah.

It would appear that Paul at least concerned himself here with the need for following customary decorum compare (7:36). The definitions of “rude” vary from culture to culture, and from time to time, but at the heart is a disregard for the social customs that others have adopted. When one does not concern himself with the likes and dislikes of others, he shows a disrespect for them. Proper regard, on the other hand, indicates love for other people. Paul also may have alluded to the Corinthian church’s unruly behavior in worship services (11:4-6,13-16,18-22), or even to its improper sexual behavior (5:1; 6:15-20).

Nevertheless, love does not always require one to go along with the crowd. In fact, love might even require one to appear rude at times. In some situations it is considered rude for people to stand up for truth. For example, promoting positive and moral lifestyles is taken as rude by many today, as is presenting the gospel. In this sense, Paul himself could have been considered rude when he refused to go along with the troublemakers at Corinth. When the customs of a culture contradict the higher ideals of the Christian faith, it is not unloving to break these social mores. In fact, it may actually show Christlike love to break with such cultural norms. For instance, every loving Christian bears the responsibility to break the customs that perpetuate racial discrimination. An action is not unloving simply because someone considers it rude.

Love . . . is not self-seeking (“does not seek its own” NASB, NKJV). It would appear that Paul had in mind here the practice of always putting oneself in first place without due consideration of others. Many situations in life call upon Christians to choose between benefit to themselves or to others. The loving person puts the benefit of others over his or her own good. Paul exemplified this practice when he refused to receive money for his work as an apostle (9:6-15). He did so to his own harm and to the benefit of others. Of course, Jesus’ humiliation was the greatest expression of putting others’ benefit above one’s own (Phil 2:4-8).

As important as it is to avoid becoming **self-seeking**, it is equally important to realize that this practice does not mean entirely ignoring one’s own legitimate needs. Jesus himself withdrew from the crowds for his own benefit, sometimes just to get away and other times to pray (Matt. 14:13,23; Luke 5:16; 9:10; 22:41; John 6:15). Paul did much the same. His life was characterized by selfless service, but he would not allow his rights as a Roman citizen to be ignored (Acts 21:39; 22:25-29). In much the same way, love entails not putting oneself first, but it does not prohibit considering oneself.

Love . . . is not easily angered (“is not provoked” NASB, NKJV; “is not irritable” NRSV). The NIV probably catches the sense of Paul’s expression even though the text says nothing explicit about the ease with which one becomes angry. Those who love others do not normally become irritated and angry whenever others do wrong, but rather are slow to anger (compare Jas. 1:19). They are patient (compare 1 Cor. 13:4; 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Tim. 2:24).

Still, there are times when anger is perfectly appropriate. Paul himself became angry when he saw the idols of Athens (Acts 17:16) — Luke described him with the same word Paul used here (*paroxunomai*). His love for the Athenian people and God’s glory caused his irritation. Paul also told the Ephesians that they could be angry without sinning (Eph. 4:26). Even Jesus became angry when he saw people’s hardness of heart (Mark 3:5). It would also be hard to imagine him not demonstrating anger when he drove the moneychangers from the temple with a whip (John 2:14-17). We must never allow an avoidance of anger to become indifference to the suffering of others or to the honor of God.

Love . . . keeps no record of wrongs (“does not take into account a wrong suffered” NASB; “is not . . . resentful” NRSV; “thinks no evil” NKJV). People who love others do not keep meticulous records of offenses. They “cover a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8; compare Prov. 10:12), and they offer forgiveness time and again (Matt. 6:12; 18:21-35). Jesus (Luke 23:34) and Stephen (Acts 7:60) both demonstrated this type of love by forgiving the very people who were wrongfully putting them to death.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Paul spoke absolutely here. To have no record of offenses makes it impossible to help others with many of their problems. Paul certainly received reports on the wrongdoings in the Corinthian church (1:11; 5:1; 11:18). Someone else had to keep a record in order to give him these reports. Yet, in

these and other positive situations the purpose of the record keeping was restorative, not vengeful or begrudging.

13:6. Love . . . does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. Paul juxtaposed **evil** and **truth** in this description of **love**. This contrast suggests that the term **truth** means something like “living according to the truth.” In other words, those who truly love do not enjoy seeing their loved ones stumble into evil. They rejoice instead when their loved ones try to live according to the truth of the gospel. The Corinthians had delighted in the immorality taking place in their church (1 Cor. 5:1,2,6). Here Paul revealed that such enjoyment demonstrated a lack of love for the man and woman living in sin. Sin destroys people’s lives, so to rejoice in their sin is to rejoice in their destruction.

13:7. Love . . . always protects (“bears all things” NASB; NRSV; NKJV). Major English Bible versions translate the term “protects” (*stego*) very differently from one another. The word can mean “to endure” or “to cover, protect.” If Paul had in mind the concept of endurance (compare 1 Cor. 9:12; 1 Thess. 3:1,5), he meant that love bears with many offenses and does not stop loving even under the strain of difficulties imposed by others, even going so far as to love enemies (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27,35). If instead he had in mind the concept of covering, then he may have meant that love will not seek to expose the sins of others (see 1 Pet. 4:8). In all events, the basic idea is that Christian love handles the sins of others in ways that will not bring exposure or shame (compare Gal. 6:1).

It is evident that Paul himself limited such endurance or protection. For example, he instructed Timothy that “those who sin are to be rebuked publicly” (1 Tim. 5:20). Likewise, he himself called rather public attention to the strife between Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), and commanded the Corinthians to stop tolerating the man who had his father’s wife (5:1-13). As in all circumstances, wisdom is required to know when and how to protect or to expose. Yet, one who loves always tends to protect others.

Love . . . always trusts. This characteristic of love is difficult to define clearly. Perhaps it is best expressed in contemporary English idiom as: “love gives the benefit of the doubt.” Suspicion and doubt toward others do not usually indicate much affection or love. On the contrary, when someone loves with Christlike love, he entrusts himself to the one he loves time and again. Needless to say, love still will not go beyond certain limits. Love does not demand that one trust even when all bases for trust have been destroyed. To put it another way, love does not give the “benefit” when there is no “doubt.” In these circumstances trust becomes folly. Yet, the general practice of those who love is to trust the good intentions of others as much as possible.

Love . . . always hopes. Here Paul pointed out that loving someone requires maintaining a measure of optimism on that person’s behalf. **Hope** is an attitude that good will eventually come to those who may now be failing. It stands opposed to pessimism. Failure invades every Christian’s life, and it often causes others to give up

on the one who fails, imagining a bleak future at best for that one. Yet, Christians who love continue to hope for the best. Keeping an optimistic outlook toward others often provides the very impetus that encourages them to keep moving forward. In some sense, the hope of which Paul spoke was placed not so much on the Christian himself, but on Christ. After all, the hope of each Christian is that Christ will preserve him to glory (13:13). When a brother falls, it is Christ who picks him up and makes him stand (Rom. 14:4; Jude 24), for Christ is the one who promised to finish the work he began (Phil. 1:6). Needless to say, however, optimism can also become foolishness and wishful thinking. For example, Paul did not hold out hope that the incestuous man would repent without undergoing extreme church discipline (5:1-13).

Love . . . always perseveres. Christlike love does not stop when it becomes difficult. Loving someone is easy when the other person does not challenge one's affections by offending or failing. For this reason love's quality becomes evident when it must endure trials. The New Testament encourages Christians to persevere in their Christian walks (2 Tim 2:12; 1 John 5:2-5). Here Paul had in mind particularly the need to persevere in love for others. Christians should look to the length and perseverance of Christ's love as the standard for their own (Rom. 8:35-39).

In 13:4-7 Paul touched on vital dimensions of love, but one must always remember that his description was neither exhaustive nor thoroughly qualified. In many respects, this brief list provides a valuable summary of a vast subject. Yet, these words cannot be understood properly when taken alone. This description of Christian love must be seen in the light of the rest of Scripture's teaching on human and divine love.

THE SUPERIORITY OF LOVE (13:8-13)

Having given a brief description of the features of Christian love, Paul returned to compare love to the spiritual gifts the Corinthians valued so highly. Turning away from the hyperboles with which he began this chapter (13:1-3), he looked realistically at the nature of these spiritual gifts.

13:8a. Paul set up a sharp contrast between Christian love on the one hand, and prophecy, tongues, and knowledge on the other. These were the same topics with which he began this chapter (13:1-2). In the verse at hand, he first asserted that **love never fails**. By this expression Paul indicated that those who devote themselves to Christian love involve themselves in something far beyond the ordinary. They actually participate in the grace of God himself. The apostle John wrote that "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). As followers of Christ, believers receive the grace of God to express that divine love in human form. In fact, the love Christians express in this life will extend to eternity. Even after Christ's return in glory, Christians will continue to share in the love God has for all his own. For this reason, Paul exalted love to a special place. The experience of Christian love as Paul defined it is one of the few ways Christians now taste in part that perfection that awaits in full in the new heavens and new earth.

13:8b-9. In contrast to love, Paul described three other Christian graces as temporary. **Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge** will not carry over to eternity in the same way that love will. **Prophecies . . . will cease; tongues . . . will be stilled; knowledge . . . will pass away.** These gifts are as temporary as they are partial. Spiritual gifts do not divulge full knowledge or prophecy, so that believers only **know in part** and **prophecy in part**. Paul did not explicitly justify his assertion that **tongues . . . will be stilled**. Rather, he implied that **tongues** were another partial gift by grouping it with the closely related gifts of prophecy and knowledge. He assumed the Corinthians would understand that it too would pass away with these others. Prophecy, tongues, and knowledge were all from the Holy Spirit and therefore were all-valuable in the church (12:7), but the nature of the gifts made their value only temporary, not eternal. Not being of eternal value, they would eventually cease to be manifested.

13:10. Paul stated rather directly that the **imperfect** understandings Christians gain through gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge would **disappear** at the coming of **perfection**. Significantly, even though he alluded to the gifts of prophecy and message of knowledge in the previous verse (13:9), he specifically avoided speaking directly of them. Instead, he spoke of the benefit Christians derive from them. The gifts don't disappear — **imperfect** understanding **disappears**. Christians will **put** the gifts **behind** them when their need for the gifts is gone (13:12).

Some interpreters have understood Paul to be speaking in this passage of the closure of the canon of Scripture. They argue that the closure of the canon the "**perfection**" to which Paul referred, and therefore that the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and the word of knowledge have ceased. As common as this interpretation may be, there is no basis for understanding Paul in this way. Nothing in the text suggests that Paul spoke of Scripture itself, and nowhere does the Bible refer to itself as "**perfection**." Moreover, Paul normally used the word **perfection** (*teleios*) to refer to "maturity" (1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:15; Col. 1:28). This was almost surely his meaning here, proven by the fact that in 13:11 he used the metaphor of human maturity. His point was that the church has **imperfect** understanding because it is not yet mature. Its understanding will not be perfect until it reaches maturity.

The closure of the canon of Scripture did not bring the church to instant maturity. In fact, God has given Scripture in order that by it the church might be better equipped to reach maturity. The church uses Scripture to instruct, inspire, correct, and train God's people (Exod. 24:12; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:16) so that they might render due praise to him (Ps. 102:18) and be equipped "for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). Scripture is not the **perfection** to which Paul looked forward, but only a means to that **perfection**.

Further, Paul said that when **perfection** came he would see "**face to face**" (13:12), strongly implying that "**perfection**" somehow included his meeting a person. Moreover, he absolutely indicated that he would meet a person when "**perfection**" came by saying that he would **know** in the same way that he was **known** (13:12). For this latter point to

be true, Paul would need to attain a personal knowledge of someone that already had such knowledge of him. When **perfection** came, Paul would gain a greater personal knowledge of someone — someone of whom he already was learning through prophecy, tongues, and messages of knowledge. Of course, that person could only be Christ. The coming of **perfection** coincides with meeting Christ in person, therefore, for the church as a whole, it must take place at Christ's second coming, at the consummation of all things in him (Eph. 1:10). Since this did not happen when the canon was closed, "**perfection**" cannot refer to the canon.

When Christ returns and brings an end to sin and death, Christians will enter a new world of perfection. The gifts of the Spirit which are so limited now will be replaced by something much more glorious. In eternity, there will be no need for prophecy, tongues, or the severely limited knowledge the church gains in this world. All these gifts only provide glimpses and foreshadows of the perfection that will come. Just as the shadows of the Old Testament sacrificial system no longer continue now that Christ to whom they pointed has come (Heb. 10:1-14), the shadowy, **imperfect** gifts of the Spirit will **disappear when perfection comes**.

13:11. Paul supported his view with two analogies. First, he appealed to a parallel with the human experience of maturation, explaining that as a **child** he **talked, thought, and reasoned like a child**. But when he **became a man**, he got rid of **childish ways**. The gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge are so limited by the constraints of this life, and by their partial nature, that they may be compared to childish things. Just as it is unimaginable that a mature adult would resort to childlike immaturity, so it is unimaginable that these gifts will endure beyond their usefulness into eternity.

13:12. The second analogy involves the common human experience of looking at a **poor reflection as in a mirror**. In Paul's day Corinth was well known for its mirrors. Because their mirrors were made of polished brass, Paul may have been referring to the fact that metal mirrors reflect one's image only imperfectly, so that images were often quite distorted and partial at best. Corinth, however, made high-quality mirrors that probably provided rather good reflections (modern polished metal mirrors are probably not much different from Corinth's, and provide strikingly good images). More likely, Paul meant that a reflection is no substitute for a real person. A modern parallel would be the photograph. Just as modern believers may enjoy clear photographs of loved ones, those pictures can barely begin to portray the wonderful people they depict. Only the actual presence of those people can convey the full truth behind the partial truth the photographs offer.

In the same way, for Paul the gifts of the Spirit are the photographs the church has access to **now**. When Christ returns, however, **then** everyone will see **face to face**. Everything of which the gifts now speak in part will then be revealed in full. Just as a reflected image outlives its usefulness when the thing it portrays can be seen **face to face**, the gifts will have outlived their usefulness **when perfection comes** at Christ's

return. The expression **face to face** recalls a Hebrew idiom that meant personally and intimately. The Old Testament distinguished Moses as one whom God knew “face to face” (Deut. 34:10), as one with whom he spoke “face to face, as a man speaks with his friend” (Exod. 33:11). A similar privilege awaits all believers when Christ returns in glory (compare 1 John 3:2).

Repeating the contrast between **now** and **then**, between the present age and the time after Christ’s return, Paul said that he knew **in part**, but in the end he would **know fully . . . even as** he was **fully known**. By this he meant that he, and other believers as well, would know God intimately and personally in heaven, just as God already intimately and knows all believers. Human knowledge is imperfect in at least two ways: it is finite and corrupted by sin. In the world to come, believers will be fully redeemed from sin and its effects (Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 5:25-27; 1 John 3:2-3), but will still remain finite creatures. Paul did not mean that believers will fully comprehend God in eternity. That would be impossible. Instead, as the preceding verses indicate, he focused on the personal and direct nature of believers’ future knowledge of God. Instead of a reflection in a mirror, Christians will be directly in the special presence of Christ.

As the earlier chapters of this epistle indicate, some within the Corinthian church took great pride in their philosophical and theological understanding (1:11-12; 4:6-7,18-20; 8:1). Others took pride in their supernatural gifts, including prophecy and, judging by the emphasis Paul placed on it in chapters 12-14, probably tongues as well (12:21; 14:37). Paul compared the gifts and knowledge they already had to what would come at Christ’s return. By this comparison, Paul made it obvious that they had put their priorities on temporary things. They had placed too much confidence in things that would not last. By comparison to that which will come at Christ’s return, the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge amount to very little.

13:13. Paul closed his discussion of **the most excellent way** (12:31b) with a summary statement that is likely to have been familiar to the Corinthians. The triad of **faith, hope, and love** appears in many New Testament texts, both in Paul’s writings and others (Rom. 5:1-5; Gal. 5:5-6; Eph. 1:13-19; 4:1-6; Col. 1:4-5; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8; Heb. 6:10-12; Heb. 10:22-24; 1 Pet. 1:3-9,21-22; compare also Jude 20-21), so it was probably a standard grouping of virtues in the early church.

Paul spent much of his ministry emphasizing the importance of **faith** and **hope**. He presented **faith** primarily as the means by which believers are joined to Christ and thereby receive the blessings of salvation (Gal. 2:20; 3:14,26; 5:6; Eph. 3:17; Phil. 3:9). **Hope**, in turn, Paul described mainly in terms of the glories of salvation that believers receive in heaven, including things like bodily resurrection (Rom. 5:2; 8:20-25; 2 Cor. 1:9-10; Gal. 5:5; Eph. 1:10-12,18-19; Col. 1:5,22-23,27; 1 Thess. 4:13-14; 5:8; Tit. 1:2; 3:7). For Paul, **faith** and **hope** represented the means of obtaining the blessings of the gospel (**faith**), and the ultimate blessings themselves (**hope**). In this context, it is amazing to see him place even more value on love.

Paul also said that **faith, hope, and love** remained “**now.**” Although some commentators understand “**now**” to introduce only a logical conclusion, it is difficult to disregard it completely as a temporal marker because of the present tense verb “**remain.**” Thus, Paul meant that **faith** and **hope** existed at the time he wrote, not that they would always continue to exist. This reading finds further support in Romans 8:24, which teaches that **hope** does not continue when its object has been realized. Thus, the Corinthians were to focus on these virtues rather than on the gifts and knowledge they valued so highly.

To show the importance of Christian **love**, Paul included it alongside **faith** and **hope**. The centrality of **love** would have been evident had Paul stopped at that point, but instead he raised **love** to an even higher level. While **faith, hope, and love** stand above all spiritual gifts (displacing the Corinthians favorites **prophecy, tongues, and knowledge** [13:8]), **the greatest of these is love**. In this statement Paul raised a crucial question for the Corinthians. As their church struggled in its worship, especially in the practice of prophecy and tongues, what was its highest priority? Paul’s position was plain. The highest virtue for them to pursue was love for each other.

DIGGING DEEPER

A. Tongues . . . of angels (13:1)

While the Bible contains no indication that one may actually speak in the tongues of angels through charismatic gifting, the Old Testament pseudopygraphal work the Testament of Job (ca. 1st century B.C. - 1st century A.D.) does. After receiving “cords” (Test. Job 47:5) from Job, which he in turn received from God the Father as “protective amulet[s]” (Test. Job 47:11), Job’s daughters supposedly: “spoke ecstatically in the angelic dialect, sending up a hymn to God in accord with the hymnic style of the angels” (Test. Job 48:3); “took on the dialect of the archons and praised God for the creation of the heights” (Test. Job 49:2); “spoke ecstatically in the dialect of those on high” (Test. Job 50:2); and “spoke in the dialect of the cherubim, glorifying the Master of virtues” (Test. Job 50:2). Job’s daughters then “made explanation to the other” (Test. Job 51:3) of the things they had said in the strange dialects. Of course, as a pseudopygraphal work, the Testament of Job may represent completely mythological ideas rather than actual beliefs about the nature of spiritual gifting.

B. Love (13:1,2,3,4,8,13)

It is frequently argued that Greek used three or four words for love (*agape, philia, eros*, and sometimes *storge*), and that the distinctions between these words are very important when interpreting the Bible. *Storge*, however, which refers to love between immediate family members, never appears in the Bible, even though love between immediate family members is mentioned (Matt. 10:37). Its antithesis *astorgos* appears twice (Rom. 1:31; 2 Tim. 3:3), but in neither case refers to the absence of familial love. Even in classical Greek, *philia* generally referred to love between family members. This was due to the fact that *philia* originally meant love for one’s own, for those with whom

one felt a sense of belonging (compare John 12:25; 15:19). In the New Testament, *philia* appears only once and means “friendship” (Jas. 4:4). Its verbal form *phileo* occurs a mere twenty-five times, often simply meaning “kiss” (Matt. 26:48; Mark 14:44; Luke 22:47), or “prefer/enjoy” (Matt. 6:5; 23:6; Luke 20:46; Rev. 22:15), though in John’s writings and in formulaic sayings it frequently seems synonymous with *agape* (John 5:20; 11:3,36; 16:27; 20:2; 21:15,16,17; 1 Cor. 16:22; Tit. 3:15; Rev. 3:19). Like *storge*, *eros*, which refers to sexual love, makes no appearance in the New Testament.

All this is to demonstrate that no word for “love” other than *agape/agapao* appears frequently in the New Testament. Whereas *philia/phileo* was the dominant word group used to describe all sorts of love in the classical period, *agape/agapao* dominated in the New Testament. *Agape* describes many types of love, having a range of meaning similar to that of the English word “love,” so one should not place exegetical weight on an author’s use of *agape/agapao* (116 and 167 occurrences, respectively) as opposed to other words available to him — it was simply the general, all-encompassing word for love. *Agape* may be anything from the hypocritical Pharisees’ love of the best seats in the synagogue (Luke 11:43), to the love between husbands and wives (Eph. 5:25-33; Col. 3:19; Tit. 2:4), to God’s loving act of sending Christ to die for sin (John 3:16).

C. Perfection (13:10)

The Greek word translated “perfection” (*teleios*) appears in the neuter case, so it should not be translated “perfect one,” even though its coming coincides with personal, intimate knowing (13:12). In the Septuagint its meaning most closely parallels “flawless” (Gen. 6:9; Exod. 12:5; Deut. 18:13; 2 Sam. 22:26; Sol. 5:2; 6:9) or “whole” (1 Kgs. 8:61; 11:4; 15:3,14; 1 Chr. 28:9; Ps. 138:22; Jer. 13:19). Matthew used the word twice, first meaning something closer to “flawless” (Matt. 5:48), but then more closely meaning “whole” (Matt. 19:21). James also used it both of these ways (“flawless” [Jas. 1:17; 3:2], “whole” [1:4]), and also in an ambiguous way (Jas. 1:25). John used it in a similarly ambiguous fashion (1 John 4:18), as did the author of Hebrews (Heb. 9:11). In Hebrews, *teleios* also refers to “mature” believers in 5:14, which probably relates closely to the idea of “whole,” just as English designates those who are “mature” as “full-grown.”

For Paul, *teleios* most commonly means “mature” (1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:15; Col. 1:28), though occasionally it appears to be closer to “flawless” (Rom. 12:2; Col. 4:12). Judging from the metaphor of maturity in 1 Corinthians 13:11, and Paul’s dominant usage, *teleios* almost certainly means “mature” in 13:10. Of course, with the article *to*, the adjective *teleios* functions as a noun (“maturity”).

D. Mirror (13:12)

Though mirrors (*esoptron*) in the ancient world were metal, they were not considered to render poor images. In fact, they rendered rather good images by most ancient accounts. Whether or not ancient standards agree with modern ones when it comes to judging reflective qualities, the point is that Paul’s metaphor relies on the ancient understanding of the reflective qualities of mirrors. Thus, his metaphor probably

did not assume that the famous Corinthian metal mirrors provided blurry or unclear reflections.

Plato, writing in the 4th century B.C., compared augury to a mirror, and spoke rather highly of the brightness and purity of the mirror's image:

“Such is the nature of the Liver, which is placed as we have described in order that it may give prophetic intimations. During the life of each individual these intimations are plainer, but after his death the liver becomes blind, and delivers oracles too obscure to be intelligible. The neighbouring organ [the spleen] is situated on the left-hand side, and is constructed with a view of keeping the liver bright and pure, — like a napkin, always ready prepared and at hand to clean the mirror” (Plato. “Timaeus,” 72. B. Jowett, trans. The Dialogues of Plato, p. 50. New York: Random House, 1892).

Similarly, the Old Testament apocryphal book Wisdom describes wisdom in glowing terms, also calling it a mirror, demonstrating its estimation that mirrors provide high-quality reflections:

“There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (Wis. 7:22-26).

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. What intrinsic value do gifts of the Spirit have? Can a gift benefit the church even if it doesn't benefit the one manifesting it? How does love relate to the value of spiritual gifts?
2. How would you describe love? Does your definition look anything like Paul's? Was Paul's definition meant to be exhaustive?
3. Does Paul's definition of love look more like something you feel or something you do? If you simply did the things in his definition, would that qualify as love? Why or why not?
4. Why are gifts like prophecy, tongues, and knowledge only “partial”? When will these gifts cease? Will other gifts cease, too? If so, which ones? Do all gifts that

cease necessarily have to cease at the same time? Why or why not? What does your church teach about the continuation, cessation, or modification of the gifts?

5. What did Paul mean by “know fully”? Do you think he was referring to knowing facts, or to knowing a person? Why?
6. What did Paul mean by the words “faith” and “hope”? Until when do faith, hope, and love remain? Why is love the greatest of these?
7. How does love constitute “the most excellent way”?
8. How does this chapter relate to chapters 12 and 14? Does chapter 13 seem out of place in this discussion? Why do you think Paul spent so much time talking about love in between two long discussions of spiritual gifts?
9. How would you apply the principles of this chapter today?