

May 31
Lesson 14

THE GREATEST

IS LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ephesians 3:14-21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 13

1 CORINTHIANS 13

¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.



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⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is

knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

KEY VERSE

Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.—1 Corinthians 13:13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List the characteristics of godly, self-giving love.
2. Explain why godly love is the defining feature of the truly spiritual life.
3. Propose one way that his or her class can express love as a group in a tangible way to another class or individual in the church.

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. Authentic Spirituality
- B. Lesson Background

I. Supremacy of Love (1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3)

- A. Regarding the Tongue (v. 1)
On Being Multilingual
- B. Regarding Spirituality (v. 2)
- C. Regarding Personal Sacrifice (v. 3)

II. Behaviors of Love (1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7)

- A. Patient, Kind, Helpful (v. 4)
- B. Concerned, Unselfish, Forgiving (v. 5)

C. Truthful, Faithful, Hopeful (vv. 6, 7)

Second Place?

III. Priority of Love (1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13)

A. Temporary Gifts vs. Perfect Love (vv. 8-10)

B. Childhood vs. Adulthood (v. 11)

C. Present vs. Future (vv. 12, 13)

Conclusion

A. Learning to Love Now

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Authentic Spirituality

Our world chatters about spirituality. While *religion* has negative connotations for many, *spirituality* is widely seen in positive terms. “I’m not religious, but I am very spiritual,” say many. If we were to accept such a distinction for the sake of argument, we would still have to ask how we can distinguish authentic spirituality from the inauthentic kind. What makes a person truly spiritual?

To get the answer to that question, we need to begin with a conceptualization of spirituality. The apostle Paul has done just that for us. His conceptualization is grounded in a most essential expression of God’s character: *love*.

B. Lesson Background

The Christians to whom Paul wrote the letter we call 1 Corinthians had come to equate knowledge with spirituality (1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-3). They also had associated certain Holy Spirit-given abilities, such as the ability to speak in tongues, with spirituality (14:1-5). Do such things make a person spiritual? Paul’s answer is a qualified *no*. Things such as knowledge or the ability to speak in other languages are indeed gifts from the Holy Spirit (12:8, 10), but these gifts by themselves do not make a person spiritually superior. In fact, the very idea of being spiritually superior is unspiritual!

In the midst of that discussion of spiritual gifts—but really in the midst of all the discussions of church problems at Corinth—Paul offered an extended, lyrical discourse on godly love. This text, our lesson for today, is in many respects the climax of 1 Corinthians. The Corinthian church was rife with problems and divisions. With God’s kind of love, Paul said, the rivalries infecting the Corinthian church would disappear.

I. Supremacy of Love

(1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3)

A. Regarding the Tongue (v. 1)

1. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

Some in the Corinthian church exalt the ability to speak in other languages by the Holy Spirit's power. Paul began to address that issue in the preceding chapter (lesson 12), and he finishes his discussion in the chapter that follows this one (lesson 13). In the verse before us, he launches an extended discussion of the use of that gift (and others) in the context of godly love.

The Greek noun being translated *love* throughout this chapter is *agapē*. Many of us are familiar with this word from its inclusion in the names of parachurch organizations and Sunday school classes. Contrary to some lines of thinking, this word in and of itself does not refer to some kind of “distinctively Christian love.” For example, the verb form of *agapē* takes a negative object in [2 Timothy 4:10](#): “Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me.” As Douglas Moo notes, the early Christians may have chosen to use this word “because of unwanted nuances in other words for ‘love’ in Greek.”

To speak various human languages by God's power is quite impressive. It appears that some Corinthians think, without Paul's approval of their view, that their Spirit-enabled languages are heavenly, angelic languages. “Surely such a gift has to come from God, showing thereby that a person is truly favored by God” they may be thinking.

But if such an impressive gift is exercised to exalt the person who is speaking, then it is done without God's kind of love. In that case, the gift is no longer reflective of God or expressive of his will. It is no longer “spiritual.”

The person who would *speak in the tongues of men or of angels* in a loveless manner becomes like an inanimate object that makes repetitive sounds. A *resounding gong* is an instrument that is struck to make a loud noise; it also may be a large bronze vessel that is put in the corner of a public building to vibrate and so amplify the sound when someone delivers a speech. The *clanging cymbal* is one of a small pair of metal pieces that are struck together, like castanets or finger cymbals, making a monotonous, meaningless sound in the process.

Any gift of the Holy Spirit is genuinely spiritual only when exercised with God's kind of love. God's gifts are wasted when they are used for purposes that do not reflect who God is.

ON BEING MULTILINGUAL

Alice Lapuerta, editor of *Multilingual Living Magazine*, grew up in a home where German, Korean, and English were spoken. She, her husband from Ecuador, and her three children now live in Austria. As a result, their children are being brought up in a trilingual environment of German, Spanish, and English.

Lapuerta notes the various challenges of being multilingual. One challenge is the spirit of elitism that can characterize some who are able to speak more than one language. Such folks may view themselves as superior to those who speak fewer languages.

A similar feeling of superiority seems to have infected some (or many) in Corinth. The

tongues-speakers perhaps projected an aura that provoked envy on the part of those who lacked the gift. To cast a broader perspective, Paul noted other gifts that could result in similar airs of superiority and envy: the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, extraordinary faith, unusual benevolence, and extreme self-sacrifice (see the next two verses below).

To counteract prideful multilingualism, etc., Paul informed the Corinthians that they needed to learn one more language: the language of love. That is the language that must always be spoken!—C. R. B.

HOW TO SAY IT

agape (*Greek*) Uh-gah-pay.

Corinth *Kor-inth*.

Corinthians Ko-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Demas *Dee-mus*.

Philippians Fih-lip-ee-unz.

B. Regarding Spirituality (v. 2)

2. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

The gift of prophecy is being able to speak God’s message by the Spirit’s power ([1 Corinthians 12:10](#), lesson 11). Paul has already noted that the Spirit equips some with exceptional gifts of *knowledge*—the ability to know or understand the things of God ([12:8](#), lesson 11). No gift enables a person to know everything of God or all the *mysteries* that he might reveal. But try to imagine someone to be so gifted as to know everything. Such giftedness would not make that person anything unless exercised with godly love.

The same is true for those gifted with exceptional *faith*. Here Paul speaks as he does earlier—not about the faith in Christ that saves but about an exceptionally firm faith in difficult circumstances. Such a gift is from the Holy Spirit ([1 Corinthians 12:9](#), lesson 11). Jesus told his disciples that with even small faith they could move mountains ([Matthew 17:20](#); [21:21](#)), and that assurance is echoed here. In the day of Jesus and Paul, to “move mountains” is a figurative expression meaning to do something very difficult or extraordinary. But even such a gift of faith makes the person nothing without godly love.

What Do You Think?

On what occasions, if any, are one’s loving motives relatively more or less important than at other times? Explain.

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Occasions of greater importance

Occasions of lesser importance

[Philippians 1:15-18](#)

C. Regarding Personal Sacrifice (v. 3)

3. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Now imagine someone so generous as to give away everything to those in need. That generosity certainly would be honored by all who see it. But if such benevolence is done for selfish motives (notoriety, etc.) rather than for the selfless good of others and love for Christ, it brings no benefit to the person who does the great act. Motive and attitude are vital (see [Matthew 6:2](#))!

The same may be said for anyone who would go so far as to give his or her body; Paul's *give over my body to hardship* may be referring to surrendering faithfully even to the point of death in martyrdom. Any act of service and sacrifice—even martyrdom—can be twisted into something self-serving. Even acts that mimic God's self-sacrificial gift in Jesus are invalidated when we do them to exalt ourselves rather than to bless others. Paul is one who dedicates himself completely to the Lord's service, suffering great physical distress in the process ([2 Corinthians 11:23-27](#)). But what he knows about bodily suffering, he must communicate: it means nothing if not done out of love for others.

What Do You Think?

Should loving assistance to the poor always be done
anonymously to ensure pure motives? Why, or why not?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

[Matthew 5:14-16](#)

[Matthew 6:1-4](#)

Other

II. Behaviors of Love

([1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7](#))

A. Patient, Kind, Helpful (v. 4)

4a. Love is patient,

The person who loves like God exercises the kind of patience that is willing to undergo lengthy hardship. How long? For as long as necessary, just as God exercises long-standing patience with

us.

4b. ...love is kind.

Godly love practices kindness. This means thinking first of the other person's needs rather than one's own. This is exactly what God has done for us in Christ ([Titus 3:4-7](#)).

4c. It does not envy,

Envy is deadly ([Romans 1:29](#); [1 Timothy 6:3-5](#)). The person who loves is not jealous of those who have more honor or possessions. Rather, they are as glad for others' blessings as they are for their own.

4d. ...it does not boast,

Godly love and bragging are incompatible. Loving people do not praise themselves or seek the praises of others. In love there is no need to be greater than others. The cure for bragging is to reflect on God's love in Christ, who went to his death for us despite the ridicule and insults that he received. No good works we do in Christ leave room for boasting ([Ephesians 2:8, 9](#)).

4e. ...it is not proud.

Paul visits this problem several times in this letter ([1 Corinthians 4:6, 18, 19](#); [5:2](#)), but with special emphasis in [8:1](#): "Knowledge puffs up while love builds up." Posturing oneself to appear better than others is being *proud*. Love, on the other hand, seeks to build up others. Paul wants the Corinthians to use their spiritual gifts not in order to appear important but to build up (edify) those around them. That is the true way of love like Christ's.

B. Concerned, Unselfish, Forgiving (v. 5)

5a. It does not dishonor others,

Love does not act in a way that brings shame or embarrassment to others. Godly concern for others means that even in small, incidental ways, followers of Christ will show unselfish respect.

5b. ...it is not self-seeking,

Because the essence of God's love is concern for others, godly love is not self-centered. As such, love does not focus on amassing possessions, honors, or status for oneself. Love's focus is on giving, not receiving ([Acts 20:35](#); [Philippians 2:4](#)).

5c. ...it is not easily angered,

Imagine someone being poked with a pointed stick. The natural reaction is to get riled up and poke back. But love does not respond in that way. It does not return evil for evil ([Romans 12:17](#)). Rather, love does what Christ did when he prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified him ([Luke 23:34](#)).

What Do You Think?

When was a time that love kept you from reacting to a provocation? How did things turn out?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- A family situation
- A work or school situation
- A church situation
- Other

5d. ...it keeps no record of wrongs.

This expression refers to keeping an account of evil things that others do to oneself. Love forgives, and true forgiveness means treating the other person as if nothing had happened. Keeping a mental *record of wrongs* that others have done to us serves no purpose except to justify taking revenge on that person at some time in the future. For one who loves, such a record is pointless (compare [Hebrews 8:12](#); [10:17](#)).

C. Truthful, Faithful, Hopeful ([vv. 6, 7](#))

6. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

When we focus on ourselves, we resent other people's blessings and are happy when others experience hardships. But when the godly person *rejoices with the truth*, he or she sets aside the self-interest that deceives us into being glad when others suffer. The loving person is free and ready to celebrate when others rejoice and to mourn sincerely when others mourn ([Romans 12:15](#)).

7. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

What are the boundaries of godly love? Peter asked Jesus whether he was to forgive up to seven times, and Jesus replied "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" ([Matthew 18:21, 22](#)). Just as God is willing to wait a lifetime for wayward people to turn back to him, so those who love as God loves are prepared to undergo what may seem to be an endless line of hardships for the sake of others. They never give up supporting others, never cease in believing in others, never run out of hope for others, and always endure whatever happens because of their commitment to others.

If this kind of love seems unreasonable, remember God's own boundless love. As those who have received his love, we are compelled to love others in the same way. With Paul, let us "put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ" ([1 Corinthians 9:12](#)).

SECOND PLACE?

Time magazine featured President Obama as its 2012 Person of the Year. Tim Cook, the successor to Steve Jobs at Apple, was the runner-up. One commentator said, "There's absolutely

no shame in finishing second, especially when you're going up against the President of the United States." On the other hand, some propose that first place is everything and second place is nothing. Perhaps you remember this Nike™ advertising slogan from the 1996 Olympics: "You don't win silver; you lose gold." Third place? Don't bother to ask!

So which philosophy above reflects the Christian life? Neither one! Both assume that (1) there is only one first-place finisher just by definition and (2) there is also a second-place, silver-medal position. But in Christ everyone can be awarded the gold medal of eternal life. A silver medal does not exist in Christianity, only gold.

Earlier in this letter, Paul draws a parallel between the Christian life and the athletic contests of running and boxing (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; compare Galatians 5:7; 2 Timothy 4:7). There is indeed an opponent to defeat, but that opponent is Satan and his influences, not our fellow Christian. Instead of competing against others, we extend loving hands of patience, kindness, humility, etc., to help them cross the finish line with us.—C. R. B.

III. Priority of Love

(1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13)

A. Temporary Gifts vs. Perfect Love (vv. 8-10)

8. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Summing up the previous section, Paul affirms that godly love will never give up or give out. That observation leads to a comparison. The gifts that the Corinthians are emphasizing are of lesser significance than godly love because unlike love, they will not endure forever. When God's purpose is fulfilled at Christ's return, there will be no need for *prophecies* (the Spirit-empowered declaration of God's message), for God's truth will reign supreme. The gift of *tongues* will cease as it gives way to perfect, face-to-face communication between God and his people. Special gifts of *knowledge* will no longer be needed as all God's people will learn directly from the Lord, as his truth is fully revealed to all.

Such gifts, important as they are, lack the eternal priority that characterizes love. They will no longer be exercised, but in God's eternal presence his people will love him and love each other forever in perfect harmony.

9, 10. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

Paul has already affirmed the importance of knowledge and prophecy for building up believers (1 Corinthians 12:8, 10; see lesson 11). Rightly exercised, those gifts provide the understanding that the Corinthians need to put their faith into practice. But presently their knowledge of God's message comes to them step by step, piece by piece. The gifts that contribute to their growth are important, but only as long as their condition is partial, still being added to.

Things change *when completeness comes*, and there are different proposals on what this

completeness refers to. Some think it refers to the day of Christ's return, when the partial, step-by-step growth in Christian knowledge we experience now shall give way to full knowledge of God's will for his people. Others think that the *completeness* refers to the completion of the New Testament. When that happens, the readers will have no need for further divine revelation to supplement what they currently receive piecemeal (as Paul writes his letters, etc.).

Either way, the stress is on the contrast between that which is temporary and that which is permanent. Love is in the latter category. It will remain as the eternal foundation of God's relationship with his people.

B. Childhood vs. Adulthood (v. 11)

11. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

Paul now uses a person's developmental stages to illustrate Christian growth. A child's view of the world is partial, growing by steps. Each child requires special supports for nurture and growth. So it is with God's people regarding spiritual growth (compare [1 Corinthians 3:2](#)). God is nurturing us, growing us, through the Spirit's gifts.

In adulthood, however, one can set aside the means by which one was nurtured as a child. So it is, Paul says, with the Spirit's gifts. On the day they are set aside, God's love continues still.

What Do You Think?

How has the hope of Heaven changed your perspective on worldly things? How does this relate to issues of childhood to be left behind?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding material possessions
- Regarding personal talents and abilities
- Regarding personal accomplishments
- Regarding personal goals
- Other

C. Present vs. Future (vv. 12, 13)

12. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Paul uses his readers' experience with mirrors to move his arguments to their conclusion. An ancient mirror, unlike a modern mirror, is made of polished bronze. This yields a reasonable image, but an image that is not as clear as viewing something directly. So it is in the Corinthians'

current experience: they see truly, but only via the imperfect image of *a reflection* that polished bronze can yield.

Full knowledge, on the other hand, is like seeing *face to face*—much clearer! The goal is to know God as he already knows us. When that goal is achieved, the need for the Spirit's gifts will be ended. Even so, love will continue (next verse).

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

Elsewhere Paul presents faith, love, and hope as the chief virtues of the Christian life (see [1 Thessalonians 1:3](#); [5:8](#)). *Faith* is fundamental; it is the attitude of trust and confidence in God. *Hope* is that confident trust focused on the future; it is believing with assurance that God will fulfill his promises for us. *Love* is the commitment to the other person's good at whatever cost to ourselves.

In eternity, faith will be transformed as it yields to sight. Hope will be transformed as God's promises are fulfilled for us. But love, *the greatest of these three*, will become only greater.

What Do You Think?

Why is a proper understanding of *love* critical to genuine biblical faith?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of how God is to be viewed

In terms of how other people are to be viewed

In terms of how we are to view ourselves

Conclusion

A. Learning to Love Now

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have shared love eternally, without beginning. Christians will join in that eternal love without end.

But the challenge is not in eternity. The challenge is in the present. We need to see each other as God sees us: of great worth despite the way we fail and disappoint. In loving others as God loves us, we gain a glimpse of what life, what eternal life, is all about.

B. Prayer

O God, your everlasting, all-enduring, gracious, merciful love is beyond comprehension! Teach us how you love us so that we can love one another. In the name of the loving Christ, amen.

C. Thought to Remember

To give love, first give in to love.



Visual for Lesson 14. Point to this visual as you ask, “In what ways can expressions of love within a marriage be modeled on today’s text?”

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Some of the activities below are also found in the helpful student book, NIV Bible Student.

Don’t forget to download the free reproducible page from www.standardlesson.com to enhance your lesson!

Into the Lesson

Write the phrase *Even though* _____, *so what unless* _____? on the board in large letters. Ask learners to suggest possible completions. If you want to give an example, say, “Even though I am a teacher of this class, so what unless I show up to teach?”

After several proposals, say, “We could call this the conclusion to today’s text: Even though one has impressive God-given gifts, so what if there is no love shown?”

Into the Word

Give two good readers a copy of the following dialogue to deliver to your class. Inform Reader 2 not to read the verse designations at the end of his or her segments.

Reader 1: I can speak six languages!

Reader 2: But you don’t love others! So what? (v. 1)

Reader 1: God has given me the ability to speak like the angels Gabriel and Michael!

Reader 2: So? You’re not using that ability to bless others. (v. 1)

Reader 1: I can predict the future!

Reader 2: But your communication is hindered because of your lack of love. (v. 2a)

Reader 1: I have degrees from the best universities. My understanding of the human condition is the envy of scholars!

Reader 2: But it’s only fodder for your ego since you’re not using your knowledge to benefit others. (v. 2b)

Reader 1: My faith is so profound, I can move mountains!

Reader 2: But why aren’t you helping others deepen their faith? (v. 2b)

Reader 1: I may give the fortune I have accumulated in the stock market to a foundation to benefit the poor!

Reader 2: If you do, will you be caring about the poor or the accolades of others? (v. 3a)

Reader 1: I’m even thinking about donating a kidney for someone who needs one!

Reader 2: But what would be your motive? (v. 3b)

Reader 1: Look! I have all the attributes of a good person: I’m kind and self-controlled; I don’t anger easily; I am always glad to see truth triumphant; etc. Look at me!

Reader 2: That is certainly what you want. But you do not love others. And that is why it will all come to nothing. Love is everything! (vv. 4-7)

When the dialogue ends, go back over its segments with learners to note the parallels and inadequacies of the paraphrase as you compare and contrast it with the actual text. (Giving each learner a copy of the dialogue before you do so, or projecting it on a screen, will make it easier to follow along.) When you are ready to consider [verses 8-13](#) (not covered by the dialogue), lead a discussion as you ask, “What parallels, summations, and enhancements do you see in [verses 8-13](#) in relation to [verses 1-7](#)?”

Option. Distribute copies of the “If I ...” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download, for learners to work on individually for a few minutes. This will serve as a good transition to Into Life.

Into Life

Say, “Note that Reader 1 in the dialogue was ready and eager to talk about his [or her] abilities and contemplated sacrifices, but was hesitant to examine motives behind those. What are some things we could do as a class to serve an individual or our church as a whole while maintaining love as our only motive?” Encourage brainstorming, jot ideas on the board, and select one to initiate.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Love Is ...” activity from the reproducible page as a take-home exercise. This will enhance your learners’ understanding of the Bible’s concept of love and encourage individual action in that regard.