

Love

DIVINE LOVE

Focal Verses • 1 CORINTHIANS 13: 1-13

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: DEFINE Paul's understanding of love as the apex of the Spirit-led life; APPRECIATE love as motivation to share our God-given gifts; and ACT in love when sharing our God-given gifts.

In Focus

Selena was president of the church's usher board. She was always on time, impeccably uniformed, and knew all of the hand signals. Whenever Selena was on duty, the members had their envelopes and fans before they requested them; she immediately moved forward when she heard crying babies—firmly removing them from their parent's arms and delivering them to the nursery so the services could proceed without disruption.

As she moved about the sanctuary this morning, Selena was clearly irritated. She had met with Pastor Bob Jenkins on Saturday afternoon, and he had been critical of her work. Pastor complimented Selena on her faithfulness and dedication. However, he said while she clearly enjoyed being an usher, he was concerned that she didn't love the members. "Nothing can replace our love for others," Pastor Jenkins said. "Working on their behalf is fine, but it is meaningless unless our work is motivated by love. Christian love is essential to make any ministry effective."

Selena was so distracted thinking about the pastor's rebuke that she dropped the offering plate during service. It clanged loudly and spilled its contents on the floor. As congregants helped her pick everything up, Selena realized her loveless attitude was a disruption to the service; it was worse than the loud cry of a baby. Selena took a calming breath and prayed God would fill her with patience, kindness, and all the attributes of love.

When have you had to remind yourself to minister in love rather than just fulfill a church obligation?



Keep in Mind

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity"
(1 Corinthians 13:13, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV **Corinthians 13:1** Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

The People, Places, and Times

Corinth. The city of Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, which included the southern half of Greece. The ancient Greek city-state of Corinth had been completely destroyed in 146 BC when the Romans conquered the area. In 44 BC, Julius Caesar ordered that the city be rebuilt as a Roman colony. Corinth was a major trade city located on an isthmus that connects cities in northern Greece, like Athens and Delphi, with cities on the Peloponnesian peninsula, like Sparta and Olympia. It also benefited from maritime trade on the Aegean Sea to the east and on the Gulf of Corinth to the west. This location made Corinth a bustling trade and cultural center.

Corinth was socially, culturally, and religiously diverse. In fact, in AD 49 a good number of Jews who were expelled from Rome resettled in Corinth. The Christians of Corinth

reflected the diversity of the city. Congregations included wealthy persons, merchants, slaves, and former slaves. During the time in which Paul wrote, Corinth was known for its wanton sexual immorality. The Greek word *korinthiazesthai* (**KO**-rin-thee-**ADZ**-ess-thai), which means to live like a Corinthian, meant that one lived immorally.

Background

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians while he was living and ministering in the city of Ephesus. The letter was written between AD 53 and 55. During his time in Ephesus, he had also received a letter from the church at Corinth (7:1) expressing confusion about marriage, divorce, corporate worship, bodily resurrection, and living in a pagan society. Paul wrote to encourage the Corinthians and to emphasize the importance of holiness. He also wrote to correct their misunderstanding and

abuse of spiritual gifts, which he discussed in chapter 12. Chapter 13 is often misinterpreted, which leads to its improper application as merely an ode to the virtues of love. Paul was using 1 Corinthians 13 to address specific issues in the Corinthian church: selfishness, division, abuse of gifts, and envy.

The Greek term for love (KJV: charity) used in this chapter is *agape* (ah-GAH-pay). This word is closely associated with the Hebrew word *chesed* (KHESS-ed), which refers to God's covenant love for His people. Because of this association, *agape* became a keyword for describing God's character and took on the meaning of a divine love that is deeply loyal. Believers should emulate this love.

At-A-Glance

1. Love is Superior (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)
2. Characteristics of Love (vv. 4–7)
3. Love Endures (vv. 8–13)

In Depth

1. Love is Superior (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

The Corinthians held eloquence in especially high esteem and were somewhat preoccupied with the gift of tongues. However, even the most sophisticated gift of tongues is just noise if not exercised in love. Prophecy, though a desirable gift (14:1), is useless without love. Knowledge of the deepest mysteries of God has no value apart from love. Faith, even when great enough to move mountains, is nothing apart from love. Likewise, boundless generosity is not profitable without love. Willingness to suffer, even to the point of martyrdom, is worthless in the absence of love.

Love is essential. Spiritual gifts are nothing without love; they can even be destructive when not practiced in love. Love is what enriches

the gifts and gives them value. Whatever our gifts, love should be the motivating factor and pleasing God our objective.

If works without love are useless, should we stop making an effort to give of ourselves?

2. Characteristics of Love (vv. 4–7)

Paul gives a beautifully elaborate and poetic description of love that can be summed up in verse 7: love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. Paul's use of language implies that love must be active at all times. Love "beareth all things." It withstands the assault and protects those under its sphere of influence. Love "believeth all things." It is always willing to give the benefit of the doubt. Love "hopeth all things," and does not despair. Love "endureth all things," including temptation or testing.

Paul highlights the character of love as Christians should express it. His descriptions of love are active, indicating that love is something one does, not merely an emotion. As Christians, we have received the love of God. Therefore, we are to love others. Contrary to what many believe, love is not an abstract notion. Love is practical and must be put into practice on a daily basis. Christians must constantly be aware of their actions and ask themselves, "Did I show love in that situation or toward that person?" Paul explains that love results in characteristics that can be seen and heard.

Describe how you have seen these aspects of love shown in Christians you admire.

3. Love Endures (vv. 8–13)

Love surpasses all the other spiritual gifts because they will pass away, while love endures forever. Prophecy, tongues, and knowledge are limited (v. 9). Further, a time will come when those gifts will not be necessary. They are given by the Spirit for the building and maturation of the church. We will not need such things in heaven, but we will experience love there.

We exercise our gifts imperfectly. Our knowledge is imperfect, like seeing indirectly, as if through a bronze mirror. (Corinth was well known for its bronze artistry and bronze mirrors.) However, imperfection will give way to perfection, enabling us to see perfectly. In the perfection of heaven, we will experience love eternally. Because love is eternal and is superior to the other spiritual gifts, it is childish to focus on spiritual gifts to the exclusion of love.

Not only is love superior to spiritual gifts, it is also superior to faith and hope. Just as in heaven we will no longer need prophecy or tongues, we will also no longer need faith when we finally see God. At that point, all hope will be fulfilled (cf. Romans 8:24). Since love outlasts all of these, love is the greatest gift of all.

How are we to “put away childish things” but still retain child-like faith?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why is love superior to the other spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 13:8)?
2. Make a list of what specifically Paul says love does (vv. 4–8)
3. After other spiritual gifts cease to exist, what will remain (v. 13)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. As we continually experience the love of God, how can we show His love to others? How can we demonstrate more love in our relationships? How can we express love in difficult situations?
2. Paul writes to the Corinthians in response to their abuse and misunderstanding of spiritual gifts. What are some of the practical ways we can work to ensure that all members of the body of Christ, regardless of their spiritual gifts, are loved and valued?

Liberating Lesson

Over 500,000 children in the U.S. currently reside in some form of foster care. Two-thirds of

these children are African American, and they stay in foster care longer. The challenges of these children are complex and may include blaming themselves and feeling guilty about removal from their birth parents, feeling unwanted if awaiting adoption for a long time, and feeling helpless about multiple changes in foster parents over time. These children are in desperate need of love. How can you help? In many states across the U.S., you are probably eligible to become a foster or adoptive parent. You must be over the age of 21 and financially stable. You must also meet certain safety requirements, such as criminal and child abuse screening. There are no preferences made to race or ethnic origin, educational background, marital status, occupation, or homeownership. How might helping or even fostering these children show the love of God? Consider becoming a foster parent.

Application for Activation

True love comes from God. It is the very nature of God. We demonstrate our love for God when we show our love for one another. We are often frustrated in our church work, especially when it feels as though others are not as committed as we are. Over the next week, pray and ask God to reveal to you areas where you may have failed to demonstrate love toward your co-laborers. Then, ask God what you can do to remedy the situation. Also, ask Him how to show love to those who don't show it to you. It may call for you to make apologies, seek forgiveness, or even forgive others; but it will be worth it.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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Say It Correctly

Achaia. ah-KIE-ah.
Peloponnesian.
peh-low-pow-NEES-ee-an.
Aegean. ah-GEE-an.

Daily Bible Readings

DAY 260

Luke 13:1-35
Psalm 106:1-5

DAY 261

Luke 14:1-35
Psalm 106:6-15

DAY 262

Luke 15:1-32
Psalm 106:16-27

DAY 263

Luke 16:1-31
Psalm 106:28-33

DAY 264

Luke 17:1-37
Psalm 106:34-46

DAY 265

Luke 18:1-43
Psalm 106:47-48

DAY 266

Luke 19:1-48
Psalm 107:1-8