

Faith Requires Mutual Love

Printed Text • Hebrews 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Devotional Reading • John 13:31–35

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: DEFINE Christian love and discuss its implications; REFLECT on the ways we experience Christian love in our lives; and PRACTICE love as it is rooted in our faith in Christ.

In Focus

Joyce was president of the church's Usher Board. She was always on time, dressed impeccably in the standard black and white uniform with white gloves, and knew all of the hand signals. Whenever Joyce was on duty, the members had their envelopes and fans before they requested them; she would immediately move forward when she heard crying babies—firmly removing them from their parents' arms and delivering them to the nursery so the services could proceed quietly.

As she moved about the sanctuary this morning, Joyce was clearly irritated. She had met with the pastor on Saturday afternoon, and he had been critical of her work. The pastor had complimented Joyce on her faithfulness and dedication. He had even praised her as one of his most reliable members. However, the pastor had gone on to tell her that while it appeared that she enjoyed being an usher, unfortunately, he was concerned that she didn't love the members. Her actions seemed to resemble duty and order more than love and affection, which was not what was best for the congregation.

Nothing can replace our love for others. Working on their behalf is fine, but it is meaningless unless our work is motivated by love. In today's lesson, we will see how Christian love is essential to effective ministry.

Keep In Mind

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

Words You Should Know

A. Brotherly love (Hebrews 13:1) philadelphia (Gk.)—Mutual love

B. Tongues (1 Corinthians 13:1, 8) glossa (Gk.)—Has the simple idea of "languages"

Say It Correctly

Corinth. KAWR-inth, KOR-inth

Hermes. HUR-meez

Poseidon. Poh-SI-duhn

Pantheon. PAN-thee-on, -uhn

KJV

Hebrews 13:1 Let brotherly love continue.

2 Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

3 Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.

1 Corinthians 13:1 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.

NLT

Hebrews 13:1 Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters.[a] 2 Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it! 3 Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself. Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own bodies.

1 Corinthians 13:1 If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

2 If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing.

3 If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

4 Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud

5 or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged.

6 It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out.

7 Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

8 Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever!

9 Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture!

10 But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.

11 When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things.

12 Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.

13 Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

The People, Places, and Times

Corinth. Located in southern Greece, about 50 miles from Athens, the Corinth of the ancient world was actually a city that had been destroyed by Rome in 146 B.C., and then rebuilt by the emperor, Julius Caesar in 46-45 B.C. A Roman colony, Corinth was the capital of the province of Achaia.

Corinth was socially, culturally, and religiously diverse. In fact, in 49 A.D. 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 the wealthy, merchants, enslaved individuals, and those who were formerly enslaved.

Corinth was home to numerous temples dedicated to pagan gods and goddesses including Apollo, Hermes, Isis, Poseidon, and the Pantheon, which is a temple dedicated to all of the gods. When Paul arrived in Corinth (about 50 A.D.) the city's reputation for immorality was widely recognized. The infamous temple of Aphrodite had fallen into ruins but was home to hundreds of "temple prostitutes," making it popular with the numerous sailors visiting the city. The Greek word *korinthiazesthai*, which means to live like a Corinthian, meant that one lived immorally.

Background

In Paul's letter to the believers in Corinth, we see the challenges that faced the early church. Corinth was a large metropolis with a diverse population. The house churches that the Corinthian Christians worshiped in reflected the city's diversity. One issue Paul addressed to the Corinthians was unity among themselves, emphasizing the importance of their relationships with one another.

At-A-Glance

1. A Plea for Brotherly Love (Hebrews 13:1–3)
2. Love is the Basis of Our Faith (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)
3. Love is the Proof of Our Gifts (vv. 4–7)
4. Love is Permanent (vv. 8–13)

In Depth

1. A Plea for Brotherly Love (Hebrews 13:1–3)

The Scripture opens with "Let brotherly love continue." Our world is full of hurting people, who in turn only know how to hurt other people. As a result, our newspapers and online and TV news reports are full of stories detailing terrible murders and horrific assaults committed by and on people in every age group. Thank God that believers who have found forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ have a new and divine nature. Because of Christ's forgiveness, we are capable of loving others in a deeper and more spiritual way. We are now capable of loving the way that God loves us. However, this

capacity to love one another must be exercised. Each day, we have to plead as Jesus did, “nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (see Matthew 26:39). It is our love for God that must be the source of our love for others.

We want to remember that verse 1 is not a request nor a mere suggestion. This reminds us that there is a possibility for our love for one another to stop. Two possible reasons are failure to ask for forgiveness when we sin and refusing to forgive someone who hurts us. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to ask God to “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

Hebrews 13:3 hearkens to customs of the Ancient Near East. In that time, people traveled great distances on foot. It was a common practice for a family to provide a meal and night’s lodging to traveling strangers. Our world is very different today, and the expectation to open one’s doors to a stranger hardly seems reasonable. We can, however, ask God to provide us with opportunities to assist strangers and share with them. Hospitality is a hallmark of Christianity. We want to show the same grace and kindness toward strangers that God has shown toward us. Jesus taught that, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

Hebrews 13:3 offers yet another motivation for our Christian hospitality. The Scripture says that in doing this, we might be visited by an angel. The Old Testament has many accounts of people who were visited by angels of God. However, the word “angel” translated here means a “messenger” and not necessarily a divine creature. While a present-day angel may never actually visit most saints, God’s human messengers will most certainly visit us when we express Christian hospitality.

2. Love is the Basis of Our Faith (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

We want to remember that when Paul wrote this letter, he was keenly aware of the Corinthians’ fascination with the gifts of the Spirit. They were attracted to knowledge, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. Paul is teaching that these gifts were meaningless without love. When Paul speaks of “charity” we should read that word as “love.” More importantly, we should know that Paul is speaking of a specific form of love. He is not talking about eros, or the sensuous or erotic form of love. Nor is Paul describing philia, which means “a brotherly affection or friendship.” Rather, Paul is describing agape, “a commitment of the will to cherish and uphold another person.” In the Bible, this is the form of love that is always used when we describe God’s love. Agape describes our willful and deliberate decision to treat others with the utmost care and concern and allows us to esteem the best interests of our brother or sister above our own.

We must remember that this form of love is only possible when we love God first. Without this, the love toward one another is a sham, a mere imitation. This prerequisite is demonstrated in the Scripture when we read that there are two great commandments. The first is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.” The second is, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:37, 39; Mark 12:30–31; Luke 10:27).

When Paul speaks of “tongues of men and angels,” he is not primarily describing glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. Rather, he is saying that it is more important to act lovingly than to be able to speak all the languages of heaven or earth. That definitely includes the conduct of those who practiced glossolalia. Without love, Paul is saying, the ability to communicate is useless. Similarly, Paul tells us that if he was able to explain all the mysteries of the Scriptures, but he wasn’t a loving person, it would be meaningless.

3. Love is the Proof of Our Gifts (vv. 4–7)

Contrary to what many of us believe, love is not an ethereal (heavenly) notion. Love is practical and must be put into practice on a daily basis. Christians must constantly measure their love and ask themselves, “Did I show love in that situation or toward that person?” And, more importantly, “Am I growing?” Paul shows that love can indeed be measured and that love results in characteristics that can be seen and heard.

4. Love is Permanent (vv. 8–13)

True love will produce patience, kindness, and honesty. As Christians, we have to identify and remove things from our lives that prohibit us from being able to manifest these qualities of love. Paul identifies these hindrances as jealousy, boastfulness, resentment, and ill temperament. He understood that when Jesus returned, sin and death would end. He knew that the gifts of the Spirit would no longer be needed. Paul uses two analogies to support this. First, it would be unimaginable to think that a mature adult would resort to childlike behavior. Secondly, an actual portrayal of a person could never be obtained by looking at a reflection of poor quality. Paul was teaching the Corinthians and us that when Christ returns, Christians would have direct access to Him. Our relationship with Him will be personal and intimate. Paul was trying to dispel the Corinthians’ pride in temporary supernatural gifts. Much of Paul’s ministry had been spent teaching about the importance of faith and hope. Now, he places love right alongside them, and in fact, elevates love above the others.

Search the Scriptures

1. According to Paul, what is necessary for any service or ministry to be of value (1 Corinthians 13:3)?
2. After our spiritual gifts cease to exist, what will remain (v. 13)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. If all spiritual gifts are predicated on love, why do some workers within the churches seem to believe or behave as though it is not essential to Christian ministry efforts?

Liberating Lesson

Paul makes it clear that for the believer, love is the key. It is love that enables us to reproduce the very character of Jesus Christ in our lives and in our ministry efforts. It is only when we have love that we can access the other fruit of the Spirit. Without love, we cannot genuinely be patient, peaceful, good, gentle, or display any of the other qualities. We may be able to imitate them, but without love, they won’t be a part of our character; nor will we be able to fully embrace them in order to do the Kingdom-building work Christ has commissioned us to do.

Application for Activation

We are often frustrated in our work in churches. Sometimes 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 and seek forgiveness and forgive others.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Hebrews 13:1–3; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13

Hebrews 13:1 Let brotherly love continue.

2 Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

3 Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.

The instructions in these verses are about life in the community. These words flow directly from Hebrews 12:28, which called for a giving of thanks and worship that is acceptable to God. It is important that the service of God is not in a vacuum but is expressed by moral dispositions and behaviors in common. “Brotherly love,” or “mutual love” (Gk. philadelphia, fil-ad-elFEE-ah), the first practice that the author enjoins in Hebrews 13:1, is an important virtue in the New Testament. It is a Christian ideal as we see in Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 Peter 2:17. “Brotherly love” is not merely a matter of sentiment but involves a set of dispositions and behaviors and is intensely practical. It involves meeting the needs of others through a mutual sharing of possessions and activities. An affectionate love for fellow Christians not only restrains us from tripping them up but also prompts us to give them every encouragement possible. The author makes an insightful play on words in the use of the imperative meno (MEN-o), which means “remain” or “continue.” Love must remain; unlike other things which will be shaken.

To “brotherly love,” the author adds “hospitality” (Gk. philoxenia, fil-on-ex-NEE-ah) or “love of strangers,” a concrete expression of mutual love. It was highly esteemed in the ancient world and was certainly very important for Christians. The verse is better understood against the backdrop of itinerant preachers in the New Testament. Inns, or hotels, were expensive and had bad reputations. But as Christian preachers traveled, believers housed them and facilitated their mission. Without hospitality in Christian homes, the spread of the faith would have been much more difficult.

The author takes an additional step concerning practical love by turning his attention to prisoners. In the early days of Christianity, many believers were unjustly jailed because of their faith in Christ. The readers were probably tempted to ignore and neglect their colleagues, who were in chains, because of the associated shame. In the first century, prisoners were not well treated and depended on sympathizers for necessities such as food. People withheld help for fear of identifying themselves with the prisoners and suffering similar punishment. But Christians should have compassion on

those in prison “as if you were there yourself” (Hebrews 13:3, NLT). But as Paul writes, “If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it,” (1 Corinthians 12:26, NLT); there is something of the same thought here.

1 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.

The Corinthian Christians were fascinated with spiritual gifts, particularly the gift of tongues. But Paul reminds them that the gifts are worthless without love. The Greek word *glossa* (gloce-SAH), translated “tongues” has the simple idea of “languages” in some contexts (Acts 2:11; Revelation 5:9). Paul goes on to say that prophecy, knowledge, and faith to do miracles are likewise irrelevant apart from love. Giving oneself to be burned is a barren gesture unless it is inspired by love. Paul’s point is clear: The Corinthian Christians were missing the motive and the goal of the gifts, making the means to become their own end. But for Paul, love trumps all. Also, for Paul, it is not an issue of love or gifts; neither must it be for us. Paul is stressing the focus and end of the gifts: love. The gifts are not for their own sake. For gifts to be effectual, love must guide their use.

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.

In 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, Paul shows a life characterized by love. The word *agape* is often used for God’s love, not ordinary human love. Paul’s description of the characteristics of love is a matter of other-directed behavior described with action words. Love suffers long. It is the type of love that characterizes God (2 Peter 3:9). If God’s love is in us, we will be long suffering to those who annoy us and hurt us. Love is kind. Kindness is demonstrated in simple acts, such as giving a cup of water to the thirsty (Matthew 25:42).

In 1 Corinthians 13:4b–6, Paul enumerates the opposite characteristics of love. Love does not envy. Whereas jealousy says, “I would like to have what you have,” envy says, “I wish you did not have what you have.” Envy is an unproductive and damaging sin for those who allow it. It accomplishes nothing, except to hurt the one who harbors it. But love keeps its distance from envy and does not resent it when someone else makes progress. Love does not parade itself: Love in action can work anonymously. It does not have to have the limelight or the attention to do a good job or to be satisfied with the result. Love gives because it loves to give, not out of the sense of praise it can have from showing itself off.

Love is not puffed up. To be puffed up is to be arrogant and self-focused. It speaks of someone who has a “big head.” Love does not get its head swelled; it focuses on the needs of others. Love does not behave rudely; it is not ill-mannered or brash. Where there is love, there will be kindness and good manners. A person who loves does not just speak his or her mind but minds his or her speech. Love does not seek its own benefit. Paul expresses this idea in a slightly different manner in Romans 12:10 and Philippians 2:4. This is being like Jesus in a most basic way: being an others-centered person instead of a self-centered person.

Love is not easily provoked. This is perhaps the most difficult to understand among the characteristics of love. In plain language, love is neither touchy nor irritable. Love thinks no evil. It does not store up the memory or keep an account of any wrong it has received. It puts away the hurts of the past instead of clinging to them.

Love does not rejoice in iniquity: “I told you so” and “it serves you right” are familiar but don’t reflect the language of love. Love desires the best for others and does not derive personal satisfaction from the failure of others. Instead, love rejoices in the truth.

Paul ends the discussion of the characteristics of love on a positive note, stating the things that love does. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. The Greek word *pantos* (PAHN-toce), is translated “all” and can also be interpreted as “always” (1 Corinthians 13:7). Paul’s point is that love never tires of support, never loses faith, never surrenders hope, and never gives up. Most of us can bear all things and believe all things and hope all things, but only for a while! The greatness of agape is that it keeps on bearing, believing, and hoping. It does not give up.

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.

The verse begins the concluding paragraph of the chapter. Here, Paul attests to the permanence of love as he continues to put the spiritual gifts and virtues in perspective. Love never fails. Paul is addressing the over-emphasis of the Corinthian Christians on the other gifts of the Holy Spirit. He shows that they should emphasize love more than the gifts because the gifts are “containers” of God’s work; love is the work itself.

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.

Paul gives the reason other gifts apart from love will cease. Those gifts, such as tongues, prophecy, or knowledge, are specifically meant to equip the believer to endure in this age. Therefore, all gifts except love can be characterized as partial.

In mistaking the part for the whole and the partial for the final, the Corinthian Christians, unlike Paul, are childish. It is wrong to suggest that verses 11–12 sees tongue speaking and prophecy as childishness, considering Paul claims to do both. What Paul is saying is that there is an appropriate age to do so and that now is that age. When the completion of that age finally arrives, then it will be time to set aside what was appropriate and needful for that age. For Paul, the three great pursuits of the Christian life are not miracles, power, and gifts. Though the gifts are precious and given by the Holy Spirit, they were never meant to be the focus or goal of our Christian lives. Instead, we must pursue faith, hope, and love.

In conclusion, it is fitting to say that Paul’s discussion in the chapter is not only powerful but also heart-searching. It calls for a careful examination of our motivation for service. There is a reason Paul put this chapter in the midst of his discussion of spiritual gifts. He wants the Corinthian Christians to remember that giftedness is not the measure of maturity; the display of love is.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

I Love You, O Lord
(Psalm 18:1-6)

TUESDAY

Faithful Love
(Deuteronomy 7:7-11)

WEDNESDAY

Obedient Love
(Deuteronomy 5:6-10)

THURSDAY

Taught to Love
(Deuteronomy 6:1-9)

FRIDAY

Love One Another
(John 13:31-35)

SATURDAY

Love Your Enemies
(Luke 6:27-36)

SUNDAY

Faith, Hope, and Love
(Hebrews 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 13)