

**FIRST CORINTHIANS 13:1–13.** (EHV)

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and know all the mysteries and have all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I give up my body that I may be burned but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy. It does not brag. It is not arrogant. It does not behave indecently. It is not selfish. It is not irritable. It does not keep a record of wrongs. It does not rejoice over unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never comes to an end. But if there are prophetic gifts, they will be done away with; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be done away with. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when that which is complete has come, that which is partial will be done away with. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put away childish things. Now we see indirectly using a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I was fully known. So now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

What happens to water when you put food coloring in it? Whatever you do with that water from then on, you're also doing with that food coloring, because the food coloring has permeated it. Blood is the same way, even worse, isn't it? I don't think it's any coincidence that the Lord made blood, pumped from our hearts, one of the most permeating agents on earth. Blood stains and permeates everything. I don't think it's any coincidence, because the Bible, and we still today, point to our hearts not just as the source of blood, but as the source of love. And Christian love is also a permeating agent. If a person has it, it stains him, it stains her, from the inside out. It stains everything he or she does.

Of all the letters in the New Testament, none addresses more problems in a congregation than Paul's first letter to the congregation in Corinth. They were dividing into factions over preferred pastors. They were filing lawsuits against each other. They had ungodly attitudes toward sex. They insisted on exercising their rights even when it meant running roughshod over other members' consciences. They were not being considerate of one another even in their meals together, which included the celebration of the Lord's Supper. And in the chapter after the one in front of us, Paul talks about how their assemblies were disorderly. Everyone, it seemed, had a message to share in the assembly, and many of those messages were spoken in tongues, in other languages that no one could understand or interpret. So they didn't actually benefit anyone.

So when Paul talks extensively about love here, it isn't as if he is digressing or taking a break from his other topics. He's actually getting to the root of all the problems he has already addressed, and he is also preparing to address the next problem. The Corinthians' main problem is that they are lacking in Christian love. If they abounded in Christian love, their love would bleed through and affect their assemblies and all their interactions with each other. Christian love is a permeating agent. If we have it, it affects everything.

Paul puts it this way: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and know all the mysteries and have all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I give up my body that I may be burned but do not have love, I gain nothing.” Christian love needs to be at the root of everything we do, needs to permeate all that we are and everything we do. If it doesn’t, who we are, what we know, and what we do isn’t really worth anything.

Now of course Paul cannot rebuke them for their lack of love without telling them what love is, what it looks like, what it does. So yes, Paul sings the virtues of love here, but keep in mind that, as he does so, he is rebuking the Corinthians. When we hear, “Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy. It does not boast,” and so on, we tend to think of weddings. But Paul was not giving the Corinthians anything to read at weddings. If we were to translate these verses and their implications in the context, it would go something like this: “Love is patient, unlike what you’ve been demonstrating. Love is kind, not like what you have been. Love does not envy as you been envying each other. It does not brag like you have been bragging,” and so on.

So as Paul covers these attributes of love, it’s not just an opportunity for you and me to smile and to reflect on what a great thing love is, but it is first and foremost an opportunity for self-examination, an opportunity to ask yourself, “Where does love need to permeate more in my life?”

Love is patient. It doesn’t demand everything right now. It doesn’t expect immediate results. It is content with God’s timetable, even when his is much longer than ours.

Love is kind. It looks for opportunities to do good to others, and when it sees them, it does not pass them by and say, “Someone else will take care of those people, or their problems will take care of themselves.”

Love does not envy. It does not look with resentment at the possessions God has given others or at the gifts and abilities God has given others and say, “Why should they have that? Why can’t I?” It is happy for them, and it is content with what God has given oneself.

It does not brag. It is not arrogant. If God has given you more or better possessions than others or more or greater gifts and abilities than others, you do not flaunt it or act as if it all originated with you. You are not even able to make your own heart beat.

It does not behave indecently. Many times people equate love with following their emotions, passions, and instincts. But that is not love, especially when it leads to indecent or illicit behavior.

It is not selfish. We really need to hold this one up like a shield in the world around us today. It used to be that *selfish* and *self-centered* had negative connotations, like they should have. But more and more, selfishness and self-centeredness are being hailed as virtues. I just read an article last week that described the United States today as a “terminally selfish culture,” and it noted that self-gratification seems to have become our ultimate goal. According to the world around us, you shouldn’t do anything that’s not true to yourself or doesn’t contribute to your own happiness. But that attitude is the opposite of love. Love is not selfish. Love, as Paul wrote the Philippians, considers others better than oneself and looks not only to one’s own interests, but also to the interests of others. To put it in a way you children can understand, love gladly shares

its toys with others, and is willing to give its weekly allowance to someone else who needs it more.

It is not irritable. The NIV similarly translates that it is not easily angered. It doesn't get provoked and bent out of shape over every little fault and failure.

It does not keep a record of wrongs. We sometimes like to joke with friends after they have come up short for us in some way that now they owe us one. That's fine if we are joking, but if we're bringing up real wrongs that people committed one, two, five, ten years ago, especially to justify our own anger or selfish behavior in the present, then we are lacking in love.

It does not rejoice over unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth. Paul might be alluding back to Chapter 5, where he mentioned a man in the Corinthian congregation who had his father's wife, and the Corinthians were proud about it. But Paul is also saying more generally that love does not simply support everyone and their decisions, no questions asked, as many think today. There is a reason Commandments 1–3 come before Commandments 4–10. You cannot love your neighbor without first loving God and his Word. You cannot love others if you do first love righteousness and truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Paul does not mean here that love never confronts sin or that love is gullible and believes absolutely anything. But he does mean that there isn't anything that love isn't willing to put up with or endure as far as it negatively affects oneself. He does mean that love never loses faith or exhausts hope; for love, there is no such thing as a hopeless case.

Paul concludes this chapter by saying why love needs to permeate everything else. It's because everything else comes to an end, but love does not. Prophetic gifts, tongues, and even knowledge will all be done away with. Think about that. The knowledge we have now, the knowledge of Scripture and knowledge based on the Scriptures, which is true knowledge, will be done away with. That is, as Paul explains later, "we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when that which is complete has come, that which is partial will be done away with. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put away childish things. Now we see indirectly using a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I was fully known." So what we know now compared to the knowledge we will have in heaven is like the difference between what a two-year-old knows and what a 72-year-old knows. The knowledge we will have in heaven will be like the intimate, perfect knowledge Jesus has of each of us right now. Compared to what I will know in heaven, the knowledge I have right now, even my knowledge of God's word, is temporary and has an end.

So prophetic gifts, tongues, knowledge, not to mention business dealings, hobbies, athletic achievements, and other earthly pursuits—they will all have an end. But these three remain—faith, hope, and love. And it's not, these three remain to talk about yet. Paul is saying these three remain in eternity, as opposed to everything else which has an end at death. And the greatest of these three—faith, hope, and love—is love. Think about that! Faith alone is what saves us eternally, but love, the fruit of faith, is even greater than faith in the eyes of God! This is what God primarily created us for. He created us for love. He gave us faith and hope, so that we would love.

I may have given you the impression before that, because of its context in 1 Corinthians, I don't think this chapter should be read at weddings. But actually, if we understand its context, maybe that makes it even more appropriate for weddings than what we previously thought. If we understand Paul to be saying after each one of these descriptions of love, "That's not how you have been acting," then maybe we would approach the topic of Christian love with a little more humility. Maybe brides and grooms would have more realistic expectations of each other in their marriage. For you see, all of us are like the Corinthians in that we have always, and will always (this side of heaven), fall short in our lives of Christian love. Christian love is supposed to permeate everything, like food coloring permeates water, but our old Adam is like bleach and baking soda, trying to undo and reverse the permeating work of love.

This is why we need the One who embodies love, the One who is love itself. This is why we need Jesus. Without Jesus, we lose all faith and hope, and so we lose all love. But with Jesus, we are on the receiving end of perfect patience and kindness. He is not selfish toward us. He gave his very life for us. He does not snap back at each of our sins. He does not shy away from telling us the truth about our sinfulness and lack of love, but he does it so that he can also tell us the truth about how he keeps no record of wrongs because he has paid for all of them with his holy, precious blood. He tells us the truth about how, as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. And his love never comes to an end. "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast," he asks in Isaiah, "and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands."

Jesus, with his perfect love for us, restores our faith in him and our hope in eternal life, and so he also thereby restores our love. With his perfect example of love in the face of all sorts of hostility and evil, love exercised for us and for our salvation, he inspires us to love others, especially our brothers and sisters in the faith, as he has loved us.

Jesus, be the permeating agent of our hearts, that love may be the permeating agent of our lives. Amen.