

But the Greatest of These Is Love

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Date: 16 November 2025

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and we'll be reading from verse 27 through chapter 13, verse 13.

! Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

! Are all apostles?

Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess the gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues?

Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you still a more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

[1 : 11] And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind.

Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful.

It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away.

[2 : 13] For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child.

I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.

Well, we are continuing in our study of 1 Corinthians tonight, and particularly our study here of the spiritual gifts.

Paul devotes three chapters to this topic. It's a matter that was of great importance to him because there was great division in the Corinthian church, and their understanding of spiritual gifts was itself contributing to this division.

[3 : 27] Some people with their gifts were being elevated, and others were being disparaged and written off. And so Paul has been correcting their behavior by correcting their understanding of spiritual gifts.

He's been teaching the Corinthians. He's been teaching us about the source of spiritual gifts, that they come from God. They're given by Him.

Each of us has been given a gift assigned by God, and He's gifted us with a wide range of spiritual gifts, yet all for this same purpose.

Various gifts, but one purpose, for the common good of the church. Or another way of saying that, as Paul will say in chapter 14, for building up the body, for building up the church.

So we have all received gifts from the Spirit. He's given this wide variety, but all of them for that common good, for the building up of the body. That's God's intention. That's God's purpose.

[4 : 33] They were designed so the body might be built up. Now, the Corinthians had forgotten this, or they had not learned this, because they had not been exercising their gifts with this God-given purpose in mind, the building up of the body of Christ.

They'd been thinking, I want to build myself up. I want to be highly esteemed. I want to be praised for my impressive display of a spiritual gift.

So they weren't thinking about what was good for the church. They were thinking about just what was good for themselves. They weren't selflessly exercising their gifts for the building up of the body.

They were selfishly exercising their gifts for the building up of themselves. And so Paul is saying, you've made a show out of exercising your gifts.

You've put the focus on the presentation of your gifts rather than on the purpose of your gifts. And so all of this was contributing to this warped perspective that they had.

[5 : 42] Shift your focus away from the presentation and toward the purpose, away from making a show of yourselves and toward building up the body.

So Paul in chapter 12 was showing the Corinthians, showing us the needed function of each member of the body.

Every member has a purpose to serve with the gifts they've been given. And it's a beautiful thing. It's something to be celebrated, something that should bring us together.

The more that we understand how God has gifted the body differently, but with this unified purpose, well, the more that we live in harmony, the more we live in unity, not in division.

Caring for one another, as Paul said in chapter 12. Not jockeying for position as the most prized member because, well, your gift is more visible than that of someone else.

[6 : 46] So again, Paul has been saying, don't put the focus on the presentation of the gifts, but rather on the purpose. And what is this purpose? The common good.

The building up of the body. The mutual edification of the body. And so Paul concluded this section of his letter in chapter 12.

And this is where we left off last time with verse 31. The ESV reads, The NIV similarly says, Now most translations give us something like this.

Most translations give us Paul's words in the form of this command. And we'll see that Paul says something very similar in 1 Corinthians chapter 14.

He says in verse 1, Pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. And again in verse 39, So my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy and do not forbid speaking in tongues.

[7 : 55] So we see in chapter 14, he's giving these commands, sounding very similar to what he says at the end of chapter 12. However, perhaps it's hitting us as a bit strange or a bit confusing as we hear him say, But earnestly desire the higher gifts here in chapter 12.

Because Paul has just spent basically all of chapter 12 showing the goodness and the necessity of the whole body with its varied gifts that it's been given.

And so to then conclude that argument with this command or exhortation to desire, and to desire earnestly gifts that are higher or greater, that might seem a bit like a theological whiplash effect.

Like, Paul, you've just spent all of this time helping the Corinthians and us to live contentedly with the gifts that we've been given. You've been helping us to seek unity, to live with humility, to care for one another.

And now it almost seems as though you're unraveling that. Earnestly desire the higher gifts. And at this point in the letter, he doesn't explain any further what he means by that, by higher or greater gifts.

[9 : 24] He states it and he moves on. Now, Paul is going to do some ordering of the gifts in chapter 14. Because some gifts are more naturally suited to edify the church than other gifts.

All gifts can. But some are dependent on others to actually edify. Like the gift of tongues. Without the gift of interpretation being possessed by those present, the gift of tongues could be exercised in futility.

If no one understands it, what good is it? And that's an argument that Paul will make in chapter 14. So the gift of tongues can edify the church, certainly, but not on its own.

So perhaps, it could be argued, that's what Paul means by these higher gifts in chapter 12. Earnestly desire the gifts that aren't dependent on any others to edify the church.

Again, we're going to see that point made in chapter 14. But it's also possible, and I believe it very much flows better in the context of chapter 12 to read verse 31, not as a command or exhortation, but as a statement.

[10 : 47] Now, the original Greek here is ambiguous, in the sense that verbs in the second person take the same exact form in Greek, whether they are commands or statements.

They look identical. So this verse can be translated two different ways, and two ways that both would be faithful and valid as it relates to the original text.

So you could have it as the ESV and NIV translated, but eagerly desire the higher gifts. That's obviously a command. But it could just as well be translated, but you eagerly desire the higher gifts.

Just this statement of fact. Not a command. Not an exhortation. Just telling you how it is. This is what you do. You eagerly desire the higher gifts.

And then also, that verb that is translated eagerly desire. That verb can carry either a positive or a negative connotation, depending on the context.

[11 : 51] So when it's determined by the context to be positive, it's translated as eagerly desire. We're going to see that in chapter 14. But when it's determined by the context to be negative, it's translated as to covet, or to be jealous of, or to envy, which we actually find even closer to chapter 12.

In chapter 13, verse 4, when Paul says, love does not envy. That's the same word that he uses here in chapter 12, verse 31, that's translated eagerly desire.

Love does not eagerly desire in this sinful way. So Paul could just as well be saying, but you eagerly desire in this sinful way these showy gifts.

Or you covet these showy gifts. The Corinthians want the gifts that they deem as higher or greater.

And the standard that the Corinthians are operating under is not what most naturally edifies the church. If there's any place for differentiating between gifts, as Paul is going to do in chapter 14, the standard for that is what most naturally edifies the church.

[13 : 15] So if we're going to talk about gifts being greater than others, well, those gifts are the ones that most serve the church. The ones that most naturally help the church to grow and to build itself up in love.

If we're going to desire any gifts over others, it should be those that we can use to selflessly serve the church. But the Corinthians have been operating completely opposite to that.

Not operating under that standard at all. They want the gifts that are showy. They want the gifts that are very visible and will garner them praise from others.

That's the gifts that they think are highest or greatest. They are all wanting those gifts. It's why Paul gives all these questions at the end of chapter 12.

Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

[14 : 19] How many of those are more showy? Most all of them. And those are the gifts that they want. The gifts that they can arrogantly use for themselves. The gifts that they can show off to others.

They don't want the gifts that are less visible. They don't want the gifts that might not receive much attention even though those gifts can humbly be used for the common good of the body.

No, those are boring. Those are not exciting to the Corinthians. And so Paul is chastising them here at the end of chapter 12.

You covet the gifts that you have deemed higher or greater because of the praise that you will receive. You are making spiritual gifts all about yourself.

And brothers and sisters, we can certainly do the same. We can make spiritual gifts all about ourselves. Coveting the gifts of others. Exercising the gifts that we have for our own benefit.

[15 : 19] Thinking only of ourselves and not of the common good of the body. So what do we do about that? How do we fight against this sinful way of thinking and living as it relates to spiritual gifts?

Well, God has given us a wonderful solution this evening. As Paul says to close out chapter 12, but I will show you a still more excellent way.

Here's the solution. And it's not what you might think. It's not anything to do with spiritual gifts, in fact. It's a wonderful gift, but it's not a spiritual gift.

It's a gift of grace. This more excellent way is the way of love. Which brings us to chapter 13. One of the, if not the, most beloved chapters in all of the Bible.

It's so often read and preached at weddings. It's found in our homes with verses from chapter 13 on our walls, perhaps in picture frames.

[16 : 26] It's a beloved passage. Now, considering that, Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones says something perhaps surprising about this chapter. He says, For myself, I always feel it is the most alarming and terrifying chapter in the whole Bible.

There is certainly no chapter that frightens me to the extent that this one does. Well, why would Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones say that? Because Paul wasn't writing this chapter just so that we could have beautiful words on our walls, as beautiful as these words are.

Or, he wrote it for the purpose of correcting the Corinthians. And us, for that matter, as far as we need correcting. And so Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones went on to say, the Apostle Paul wrote this chapter in order that he might teach them how to search themselves and examine themselves.

So you don't read 1 Corinthians 13 lounging in a chair and saying how marvelous, how wonderful, or beautiful. No, you say, this is speaking to me. This is talking about me.

This is examining my heart. This is an x-ray that's going to reveal every possible deficiency that is in my constitution. So this chapter isn't just about sentimentality.

[17 : 49] It's a warning. It's a correction. It's meant to probe us, not just give us warm, fuzzy feelings. We should be asking ourselves, does love control my life as it ought?

Does love compel me as it ought? So chapter 13 is a pivotal chapter. It sits right at the heart of Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts.

It ties together all that Paul has already said and all that Paul is going to say as it relates to spiritual gifts. It binds this whole section of the letter together.

So here's the outline for chapter 13. And unlike last time that we were in 1 Corinthians, it's not a poem. There's no rhyme. It's much shorter and simpler than our last outline.

So for you note takers, it's going to be easier to write down. Here it is. Three reasons why love is a more excellent way. because of the place of love.

[18 : 56] Because of the properties of love. And because of the permanence of love. Now tonight, in the time that remains, we're just going to look at the first reason.

I set out this week to cover all of chapter 13 and by Thursday I failed at that endeavor. Too much to cover in this crucial chapter. So we have to break it up some. Just the first reason tonight.

Love is a still more excellent way because of the place of love. And we see this in verses 1-3. Let me read those again. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have and if I deliver my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing. So Paul is teaching us that without love, the exercise of your spiritual gifts, it's useless.

[20 : 09] Without love, the exercise of our spiritual gifts is worthless. You could be so very successful, humanly speaking, at exercising your gifts.

But if you have not love, it's all for nothing. Now of course, Paul is not denouncing spiritual gifts.

He's not saying, oh, you know what? Forget about them. Just pursue love. The Beatles might not have read 1 Corinthians 12 or 14 because it is not true that all you need is love.

No, he's saying spiritual gifts are good. Look at how profitable they are. God has given them to us. We would be overreacting if we read 1 Corinthians 13 in this way.

This is a benefit of working through a whole book of the Bible. We've got the immediate context right there. We've been in it. We've been studying it. And so it keeps us from error. Paul spent all of chapter 12 showing us that, the goodness of spiritual gifts, showing the benefit they are to the body.

[21 : 17] So let's not forget, they are called, very simply speaking, gifts. Gifts are good. Certainly when God is the giver of those gifts, we are sure those gifts are good.

The proper response to receiving a gift is to give thanks, to enjoy it, to use it, to appreciate it, not to set it aside and let it gather dust.

So Paul isn't doing that. He'll even say at the outset of chapter 14, pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.

So this isn't a call to pursue love and disregard the spiritual gifts. But remember, the Corinthians were getting into this comparison game with their gifts.

It was as though they were saying, well, let's take a look at your gifting and my gifting and let's see who's the more accomplished Christian. And it's for that very reason that Paul writes chapter 13 because the Corinthians had forgotten love.

[22 : 22] And as it's spelled out here in the first three verses, they had forgotten the place of love. It's first. It's foundational. It is to permeate the life of the believer.

And so it should permeate the life of the body made up of the many members who are all believers. It's not just about the exercise of gifts in the Christian life.

It's about the manner in which we exercise those gifts. The heart must be involved. It must be done in love. That comes first.

That's most important. The focus shouldn't be on which gifts you and I have in this competitive manner. The focus should be on but do you and I have love?

Whatever gifts we've been given, do you and I exercise those gifts in love? You see, that's a heart-probing question. Are we exercising our gifts out of love for the body?

[23 : 27] Are we exercising our gifts to promote the edification of the body or to promote the exaltation of myself?

And the answer will be found when we consider, do I have love? If I have no love, well, it will be for me. If I have love, it will be for the body.

And Paul then shows us here in these three verses, he shows us that by way of example. Now, Paul speaks in the realm of the hypothetical here.

He's saying, imagine that he is remarkably gifted. Gifted to an extreme measure. To a measure never seen before, never known before.

That's what Paul is saying. What if I was gifted with all these spiritual gifts and all of them in this remarkable, unheard of way?

[24 : 31] I can speak in the tongues of men and of angels. See, there's this extreme here. Even in the tongues of angels. Not just in the languages of men, but even these heavenly languages.

When we consider the gift of tongues in the book of Acts, we see that Luke in writing Acts, we see just human languages being associated with tongues.

But Paul is saying, I'm super spiritually gifted in this hypothetical example. I can speak in the tongues of men and of angels. I have prophetic powers.

But not just the ability to know and convey some truth from God, some messages from God. No, my prophetic powers in this example exceed any ordinary person with the gift of prophecy.

I understand all mysteries and all knowledge. I am so spiritually gifted that I understand and know all things. I have the gift of faith.

[25 : 36] And what kind of faith is it? All faith. The faith to move mountains. Or the gift of giving. Again, taken to the best extreme.

I give away all that I have. Even my very own physical life. I give that up too. And what good would all of that be? Possessing all of these spiritual gifts in the highest perfection.

I mean, the Corinthians would have thought, wow! The kind of person that you're describing, if you had all of those gifts in all of those ways, you've made it!

Spiritually speaking. You've arrived! The Corinthians would have said, that's what we want. That's exactly what we desire. That's exactly what we strongly desire.

Again, remember back to chapter 12. Verse 31. You strongly desire the higher gifts. The showy gifts. So Paul is giving this hypothetical, hyperbolic example of himself.

[26 : 43] This living embodiment of verse 31. Here's the kind of person you so strongly desire to be. Here's the kind of person you covet to be.

This is what that person looks like. But without love, you may look good. You may be remarkably gifted.

But, if you don't have love, what does all of that amount to? Not what the Corinthians would have expected. Remarkably gifted with tongues.

But nothing more than a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. You see, the gift of tongues properly exercised in the early church alongside the gift of interpretation when needed should have communicated truth.

Which is a wonderful thing. Truth when heard is music to our ears. But Paul says, without love, it's not.

[27 : 46] It's not music to our ears. It's actually a terrible cacophony of noise. You'd be like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. So kids, do you know what a gong is?

Kids, do you know what a clanging cymbal is? These are musical instruments that Paul is obviously talking about. Cymbals are those big metal circles that you can hit together to make musical noise.

A gong is just one big metal that you take this mallet like a hammer and you hit it. Now these instruments can be great. These instruments can add to the beauty of a song.

But they have to be used the right way. You might hear an orchestra playing a song and there's someone ready to hit the gong or the cymbal. But kids, if you saw this, you would notice that they're not just hitting the gong or hitting or clanging the cymbals whenever they want.

They're waiting. And they're waiting. And they're watching the conductor. Their eyes are fixed on that conductor and they just have it at the ready. And they're waiting and they're watching and the conductor is doing his thing, conducting, and then he makes the motion.

[28 : 59] And that person with the gong, they don't just go like ding. No, they're like wham! And they let it go. But, maybe once, wham! And then they wait, do it again, wham!

But then they stop because the conductor has said, that's it. And then they're back in position, ready to go. They're not just hitting the gong or clanging the cymbals whenever they'd like.

They're always under control. They're always enhancing the other instruments. They're always under the direction of the conductor. That's a gong or a cymbal played well.

But a noisy gong or clanging cymbals, cymbals, that's what you would get if you let the three-year-old in the audience come up on the stage and have a try at one of those instruments.

There would be a cymbals solo that no one asked for. Just beating that gong with no thought to waiting for the conductor or to blend well with the other instruments.

[30 : 03] I know a child or two who would love to play the gong like that, but that's not a gong or cymbals that anyone but that child really wants to hear.

Kids, if your little brother or your little sister or your cousins or a neighborhood friend got a hold of a gong or started playing the cymbals and they're just beating on them, what would you do?

You'd probably plug your ears up. You don't want to hear that because that's not a gong. Those aren't cymbals. that are being played well at all. Well, Paul says that's what he is without love because he's making a lot of noise but there's no substance.

And the same outcome is true of the other examples of gifts exercised without love. If we're missing the key ingredient of love, it doesn't matter how remarkable your gifting may be, you are nothing, Paul says.

You gain nothing, Paul says. Gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit amount to nothing.

[31 : 23] And that's the very first virtue listed as that fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Love. We must have love as the foundation.

Without love, the gift, the exercise of our gifts is empty. And this isn't just the case when it comes to say one particular gift.

I think that Paul is very purposeful in creating this hypothetical, hyperbolic example of himself. He includes many gifts. The gift of tongues.

The gift of prophecy. The gift of faith. The gift of giving. All of these different gifts that Paul includes as part of his example. Why do that?

Because he's showing that this applies to all of us. No matter how we may be gifted, it's the same across the board. No one can say, oh, but love isn't necessary to the exercise of any gifts I've been given.

[32 : 24] This doesn't apply to me. This chapter isn't for me. No matter what gift you may possess, are you exercising that gift in love?

Are you exercising your gifts with love for the body? Paul is reminding us there's a wide variety of gifts. There are many different functions in the body, but love should be at the heart of it all.

Even if we could exercise our gifts with such success, humanly speaking, we'd still be such failures if we've forgotten the place of love.

We should want to know what our spiritual gifts are. We should want to know how can I exercise my spiritual gifts, but not without love.

The way of love is still more excellent than any spiritual gifts. Matthew Henry says, true charity is greatly to be preferred to the most glorious gifts.

[33 : 33] To have the heart glow with mutual love is vastly better than to glare with the most pompous titles, offices, or powers. So that's the first reason that love is a still more excellent way.

Because of its place, it must be primary. Spiritual gifts are good. indeed, God has given us spiritual gifts.

The Holy Spirit has given us spiritual gifts. But we can't forget that the Holy Spirit Himself has been given to us.

The One who gives us gifts has Himself been given. And what does God and what has God done through the giving of the Holy Spirit?

Romans 5 4 tells us God's love has been poured into our hearts. You see, this love that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians, it is through the Holy Spirit that we now have this love, this self-giving love.

[34 : 40] We have it through the Spirit. Just like the spiritual gifts, apart from the transforming work of salvation, we would not have this love.

It is foreign to us in our unregenerate sinful state. Just like the spiritual gifts are foreign to us in our unregenerate sinful state.

Without Christ, we have no spiritual gifts. But even more than that, without Christ, we have no love. But God shows His love for us.

And that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And now that love, which finds its source in God, it's God's love, it's His, it comes from Him, that love has been poured into our hearts.

For what purpose? In order that we might give of ourselves as God has given of Himself for us. In love, He sent His Son to die for our sins.

[35 : 43] In love, His Son laid down His life. and now in love, we lay down ours for Him and for His body as we exercise our gifts.

Not for our own building up, but for the building up of the body of Christ. As Paul drew near to the end of this letter, as he was writing his final instructions in chapter 16, he couldn't have said it any more simply.

He couldn't have said it any more plainly. Let all that you do be done in love. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, what a gift it is that we have this salvation that You sent Your Son, this heavenly gift sent from heaven that He might live the righteous life that we had not, that we could not, that He might die on the cross the death that we deserved, that He might pay the penalty for our sins.

And what a gift Your Spirit is whom You sent when Christ ascended and He now gives us gifts, spiritual gifts that we are to use to bless the body.

[37 : 10] Father, we recognize that we need love for one another. We need love that is of You, that is only of You, a love that we know not in ourselves, that we cannot have apart from Your giving it to us in salvation.

You poured that love into our hearts. What a gift that love is to us. So help us, Father, as we live in the body, as we live alongside one another, as we seek to exercise our gifts in the body.

Help us to do all things in love, building up the body in love, just as Your Word says. So give us that strength by Your Spirit. Give us the grace to do this.

Help us that we might look away from ourselves, and that we might look to You and Your love for us, and that that would fuel us as we seek to love one another. Thank You for sending Your Son.

Thank You that He died in our place. Thank You that in sending Him, You displayed Your love for us. And it's in Christ's name that we pray. Amen.