

1 Corinthians 13-1-13

Introduction:

Have you ever pursued a good thing with a wrong motive?

Maybe you pursued an A at school (a good thing) so that others would praise you (a wrong motive)?

Maybe you pursued a member of the opposite sex (a good thing) for selfish sexual gratification (a wrong motive)?

Maybe you are currently pursuing money (a good thing) because you are greedy (a wrong motive)?

Maybe you are working out (a good thing) because you want others to worship your body (a wrong motive).

All of us have pursued good things for the wrong reasons.

The church in Corinth was no different. They pursued a good thing with bad motives.

They pursued spiritual gifts (good things) to prove their spiritual superiority (a bad motive).

Motives matter to God. What we do and why we do it are equally important.

This brings us to one of the most famous texts of the Bible, 1 Cor. 13:1-13. Paul makes one simple point.

Prop/telos: the pursuit of spiritual gifts must be motivated by love...

Unfortunately, this chapter is frequently ripped from its context. This is tempting because the passage is so beautiful on its own. But it was not meant to be read on its own. It has a context and can only be rightly understood within its context. It is often read at weddings. This would have made little sense to the original audience. When they read chapter 13 they were felt the sting of Paul's rebuke not warm fuzzys...

To understand this passage, we need to look at chapters 12-14. In these chapters Paul addresses the issue of Spiritual gifts, specifically the gift of tongues. Some think that the gift of tongues is the most important spiritual gift. These Christians look down on those who don't speak in tongues.

Paul argues that all the gifts are important. But, if they want a gift, they should want the gift that is most edifying. Prophecy is more edifying than tongues since it edifies the whole body. Therefore, Paul tells them to earnestly desire prophecy... but this must be motivated by love. We see this emphasis in what comes before and after chapter 13.

1 Corinthians 12:31 (ESV) — 31 But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Corinthians 14:1 (ESV) — 1 Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

Chapter 13 is bookmarked by two exhortations to pursue spiritual gifts. Here is the point... the pursuit of spiritual gifts must be motivated by love.

We must pursue spiritual gifts motivated by love and nothing else.

This brings up a great question, what is love??? Paul describes a few aspects of love in our passage. We will spend the rest of our time looking at each one.

First, the superiority of love
Second, the nature of love
Third, the permanence of love

First, the superiority of love.

Love is superior!

Superior to what??? Love is superior to gifting!

Before I go any further, let me remind you that Brett Sweet preached an excellent sermon on verses 1-3 a few weeks ago. I only mention them here because they are part of the larger context.

1 Corinthians 13:1 (ESV) — **1** If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Paul spoke in tongues often. In 1 Cor. 14:18 he writes, “I speak in tongues more than all of you.” But Paul says, “no matter how strong my gift of tongues is, it is nothing but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal without love.”

The noisy gong that Paul refers to was a device designed to magnify sound. It was an ancient megaphone. The clanging symbol was a loud obnoxious noise. Without love the gift of tongues is a loud obnoxious noise.

Illustration: “Good morning junior Adullum”

1 Corinthians 13:2 (ESV) — **2** 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.

Paul describes someone who is very gifted. They have prophetic powers, they understand all mysteries and all knowledge, they are filled with faith. But if they don’t love these gifts mean nothing.

Illustration: Karl Barth was the most gifted theologian of the 20th century, yet he did not love his wife... his gifting meant nothing. Steve Jobs is another example...

Love is superior to gifting. In addition...

Love is superior to sacrifice!

1 Corinthians 13:3 (ESV) — **3** If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Now Paul is talking about an insanely generous philanthropist and someone who is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, martyrdom.... Even these things are nothing compared to love. Wow!!!

How can Paul say this? Because people may give away millions to look good before others or for a tax right off, not because they love people.

People may give up their lives to prove how spiritual they are or because they think it will save their souls.

Application:

Love is superior to great acts of philanthropy.

Love is superior to prophetic powers

Love is superior to martyrdom.

Love is superior to vast amounts of theological knowledge.

Love is superior to being able to lead the church skillfully in passionate corporate worship.

Love is superior to great preaching skills.

Love is superior to great leadership skills.

Love is superior to all gifting...

Paul does not minimize spiritual gifting... but he wants to maximize love.

Ok... you have made your point. Love is really, really, really important. But what exactly does love look like? This brings us to the next point.

First, the superiority of love.

Second, the nature of love.

Before we look at the nature of love, let's look at how our culture understands love!

How does our culture understand love?

In our culture love is a feeling or an emotion we catch like we catch a cold.

We talk about falling in love... like we are victims. We don't decide to fall in love, it simply happens to us. Falling in love is like tripping over a rock. We are walking down the road and out of the blue we fall in love.

In our culture love is associated with sex. If we love someone we sleep with them...

In our culture love is associated with romance. We associate valentine's day with love.

Love is more and more associated with tolerance. "If you love me you will not only tolerate my lifestyle, but you will celebrate my lifestyle. If you will not celebrate my lifestyle you hate me."

In our culture Love often means, "I will never make any judgments against you or saying anything offensive to you, even if it will benefit you."

In the 1960s Woodstock was billed as three days of "peace and love." It was essentially three days of drugs, sex, rock and roll, with no judgments made.

The Beatles famously sang,

All you need is love

All you need is love

All you need is love, love..

Love is all you need...

Even though our culture is confused about the nature of love, they do see its importance.

So, what is the nature of love?

Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, describes the nature of love. He describes it positively and negatively in verses 4-7. Please look there with me.

Positively...

Love is patient (v. 4) this word means that love absorbs wrongs over time without retaliating...

Love is kind (v. 4) love pays back with kindness when hurt by others

Love rejoices with the truth (6) love speaks the truth even when the truth hurts...

Love bears all things (v.7) love puts up with very hard to love people...

Love believes all things (v. 7) love is not gullible but it chooses to trust others... not cynical

Love hopes all things (v. 7) love hopes for the best even when repeatedly disappointed by hard people...

Love endures all things (v. 7) love is always willing to give an offender a second chance... (Matt. 18:22)

Negatively....

Love is not envious (v. 4)

Love is not boastful (v. 4) love does not brag... literally love is not a wind bag...

Love is not arrogant (v. 4) love does not exalt itself at the expense of others...

Love is not rude (v. 5) love does not behave improperly towards others... (foul language, etc...)

Love does not insist on its own way (v. 5)

Love is not irritable (v. 5) not easily angered... not moody... not grumpy

Love is not resentful (v. 5)

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing (v. 6) it keep no record of wrongs... it does not enjoy hearing the latest gossip...

Application:

Christian love is unique.

But what makes Christian love unique? In other words, how should we summarize Paul list in verses 4-7?

Christian love is unique because Christian love, loves the unlovable... lots of people love those who love them in return. When a man says to a woman, "I love you." he usually means I find you lovely...

In 1997 the **Backstreet Boys** sang, "I don't care who you are, where you're from, or what you did, as long as you love me." (in other words, I will love you as long as you love me, Christian love is the opposite, it loves no matter what).

Justin Bieber sang: "As long as you love me, we could be starving, we could be homeless, we could be broke, as long you love me." (again, as long as you love me... I will love you)

Christian love is very different. God loves the unlovely...

John 3:16 (ESV) — 16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

God loves the world, not because he finds it lovely... the word for world (kosmos) in John's gospel means the bad world (the way of the world, the system that has aligned itself against God) not the whole world. God loves the world because he is love. Because he is love he loves the unlovable.

Romans 5:8 (ESV) — **8** but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

1 John 4:10 (ESV) — **10** In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Ephesians 2:1–3 (ESV) — **1** And you were dead in the trespasses and sins **2** in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— **3** among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

None of us were worthy of God's love. We did not love him when he first loved us. We broke his commands, rebelled against him, and spurned his kindness before conversion. We were not seeking him (Romans 3) but he sought us.

The cross is the perfect illustration of God's love for the unlovable...

Maybe you have wondered,... would my spouse still love me if I lost my limbs, lost my sight, ended up with a severely deformed face after a car accident, etc... we don't have to wonder this with God.

Paul exhorts us to love others the way that God has loved us.

God loves the unlovely.

Therefore, the church of Jesus Christ must love the ungifted, the socially awkward, the shy, the introverts, the handicapped, etc...

The world adopts healthy little babies but the church of Jesus Christ loves and adopts down syndrome babies!!!

Love shovels snow for the elderly neighbor

Love provides meals for the family that just moved.

Love weeps with those who weep.

Love makes phone calls, sends texts, or writes a letter to the depressed and lonely.

Love gives money and time to those in need.

Love forgives the spouse that has hurt them so many times in the past.

Love listens to the person that no one else wants to listen to because they talk and talk and talk non stop...

Christian love loves the spouse with Alzheimer's when they have nothing to offer, loves the wayward child when she does not love in return, loves the coworker who slanders him, loves the boss that does not appreciate her.

This kind of love is the infallible test of one's spirituality not speaking in tongues or prophesying. (John 13:35)

Where are we going to get the grace to love like this? Jesus...

Paul's description of love is crushing...

None of us can or ever will love like this, yet God requires us to. God requires perfection. God requires us to love this way 24-7. If not, we are in deep trouble...

Thankfully Jesus loved this way... but you must make a decision to trust him!

I get that love is important and I understand what it looks like... but how long must we love this way? Forever!!! This brings us to our third point.

First, the superiority of love

Second, the nature of love

Third, the permanence of love.

How important is love? It is so important that it lasts forever. It will never cease. In other words, it is permanent.

Look with me at verses 8-13. Here Paul argues for love's permanence!

1 Corinthians 13:8–10 (ESV) — **8** Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. **9** For we know in part and we prophesy in part, **10** but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

Paul specifically tells us that prophecy, tongues, and gifts of knowledge will cease (v. 8).

The question is when will these things pass away? Paul tells us, they will pass away when the perfect comes. When will the perfect come? Again, Paul tells us. The perfect will come when Christ returns...

1 Corinthians 13:10–12 (ESV) — **10** but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. **11** 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 gave up childish ways. **12** 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.

When will we stop acting like children (v. 11)?

When will we no longer see dimly (v. 12)?

When will we see God face to face (v. 12)? (Rev. 22:4)

When will we know God fully as we are fully known by God (v. 12)?

All these things will happen when Christ returns.

While these verses are fantastic evidence that the sign gifts will continue until Christ returns, this is not Paul's primary point...

Paul's primary point is to prove that love is greater than prophecy, tongues and the gift of knowledge, because love will last forever.

1 Corinthians 13:8 (ESV) — **8** Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

1 Corinthians 13:13 (ESV) — **13** So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Love is permanent! It will last forever. It is the very fabric of heaven.

Application:

Why does this matter?

Because... when Christians die they are going to a world drenched in love.

America's greatest theologian, Jonathan Edwards, wrote the finest sermon in church history on heaven. It is a beautiful sermon. It came from a series of sermons he preached on 1 Cor. 13 called "Charity and its Fruits." The last sermon, arguably the greatest, is simply called "Heaven is a world of love." It is based on the last part of 1 Cor. 13.

In this sermon Edwards argues...

"Heaven is heaven because of love. Love is not one ingredient of heaven; it is what makes heaven heaven." (Ortlund, 171)

Therefore heaven is a world soaked in love.

Edwards believed this for several reasons-

Heaven is a world of love because God is there, and he is the source of all love.

"The point is not that heaven is a lovely place and God is there too; heaven is lovely because God is there. Because God is "a full and overflowing and an inexhaustible fountain of love," God fills heaven with love the same way the sun fills a cloudless day with light." (Ortlund, 171)

In addition, all things unlovely will be purged from heaven.

Furthermore, believers will be caught up in the explosion or celebration of love between father, son, and Spirit.

Finally, since there will be no sin in heaven we will love others perfectly... this means that we will rejoice in the fact that others have more rewards and glory than we do. We will be legitimately glad that others have more than us!!!

You will never envy your neighbors looks, talents, or wealth... you will never be jealous, selfish, or insecure. You will never be rude, you will always speak kindly, you will never be impatient, you will always respond with gentleness.

"In all of this Edwards's basic point is that love is not a slice of heaven but the whole pie. Love is in heaven not as a tree in a prairie but as the light in which the prairie is bathed on a bright summer morning." (Ortlund, 172)

This is what our hearts were made for and long for. Isn't this what you long for? A world of perfect love. It is what the Beatles longed for but never experienced. Our world is characterized by pride, selfishness, and hate. The consequences of our lack of love are catastrophic.

Violence

School shootings (when are they going to end)

Racism

Sexual assault

Broken marriages

Child abuse
Gang violence
Atomic warfare
Etc...

Someday all we will know is love!!!

One author writes,

“In heaven we will be in love— not in romantic attraction as Hollywood uses the phrase “in love,” but actually in love. In it. Swimming endlessly, in ever-increasing delight, in the ocean of divine love into which cleansed sinners have been drawn.” (Ortlund, 172-173)

How does this apply to the church?

The church is meant to be an outpost of heaven. We fly the flag of the coming kingdom. The main thing that must characterize us is love. We are meant to give the world a foretaste of heaven. We are meant to be a colony of heaven.

This means we must not fight about spiritual gifts.

We must never gossip.

We must serve each other.

We must meet each others practical needs.

We must give to those in need.

There must be great affection and warmth between us...

Carson writes,

“The greatest evidence that heaven has invaded our sphere, that the Spirit has been poured out upon us, that we are citizens of a kingdom not yet consummated, is Christian love.” (Carson, 76, STS)

So yes.... Eager desire spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy, but desire them motivated by love for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Without love spiritual gifts are nothing.

Lets pray...