

## XXIV. A Still More Excellent Way

December 3/5, 2013 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:7

**Aim:** To see in Paul's description of love a picture of Jesus Christ and an exhortation to practice love in our daily lives.

Paul's references to 'tongues' and 'prophecy' anchor his words in chapter 13 to the chapter preceding and the chapter following. Indeed, this chapter is critical to the whole sermon on 'tongues speaking' that occupies chapters 12-14.

The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians may be, from a literary viewpoint, the greatest passage Paul ever penned. Among other things, it has been called the hymn of love, a lyrical interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, and the Beatitudes set to music. This gem cannot be properly understood, however, apart from its setting. Its message is integral to what Paul says before it and after it. The full impact and depth of its truths cannot be discovered in isolation. Much of the power, and even much of the purpose and beauty, is missed when the passage is studied and applied out of context.

Chapter 13 is the central chapter in Paul's lengthy discussion of spiritual gifts (ch.12-14). Chapter 12 discusses the endowment, receipt, and interrelatedness of the gifts. Chapter 14 presents the proper exercise of the gifts, especially that of languages. In this middle chapter we see the proper attitude and atmosphere, the proper motive and power, the 'more excellent way' in which God has planned for all the gifts to operate.

The burden of chapter 13 is that love is as indispensable as it is excellent. This great poem about *agapē* is actually a pastoral corrective to the deluded and wandering congregation at Corinth. Chapter 13 is a model of *how* spiritual gifts are to be exercised within the Christian community and it builds on the teaching we have just studied about the value and inter-dependence of every part of the body of Christ.

### A. Love Is a More Excellent Way (1 Corinthians 12:31b)

<sup>31</sup> *And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

Thus far in his response to the Corinthian queries (12:1), the apostle has called upon the church to give thought to the unifying function of the *charismata*. Yet, unconcerned for the overall good of the body of Christ (12:27), the people have gone astray, many indulging in wrongful self-aggrandizement. This is why he reveals that there is an upward way 'far better' (*kath' hyperbole* – 'most excellent,' 'incomparably better') than an obsessive pursuit of the gifts of the Spirit. If, then, they take his lead, they will ascend to higher levels of usefulness. The sense is that the proposed vista for the Corinthians lies far beyond anything that they can imagine. In contrast, their frenetic desire for spiritual gifts needful though they may be in their situation, is sterile.

The Corinthian Christians were not walking in the Spirit. They were selfish, self-designing, self-willed, self-motivated, and doing everything possible to promote their own interests and welfare. Everyone was doing his own thing for his own good, with little or no regard for others. The Corinthians did not lack in any gift, but they were terribly deficient in spiritual fruit, because they were not walking in the source and power both of the gifts and of the fruit. Among the many things those believers lacked, the most significant was love.

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The Corinthians were preoccupied with and enamored of the spiritual gifts in general and the more spectacular gifts in particular. They defined spirituality in terms of the gifts and assumed those who possessed the more spectacular gifts were in a superior spiritual class and left all the others far behind.

Paul had a crushing word for all who entertained such notions. He closed his discussion of spiritual gifts in general by saying there was ‘a more excellent way.’ That must have caught their attention! Imagine their horrified response: ‘What could possibly be more excellent than the gifts?’

Imagine the shock way caused by these words when first read out. After all, the church lacked no spiritual gift (1:7). What was greater than healing, or powerful signs, or being a prophet, or tongues speaking? The people must have trembled with anticipation when they heard read out Paul’s ‘And yet I show you a far better way.’ ‘What,’ they whisper the one to the other, ‘can this marvel be?’ The apostle does not tantalize them. Astonishingly, the preferred route for the Corinthians is not new at all, yet has been overlooked because it appears unspectacular.

The ‘more excellent way’ is also the indispensable way, for without love the gifts will be pursued and used selfishly and selectively, resulting in an over-estimation of some, the denigration of others, and the ultimate division of the church. To exercise them in love means doing so with care, honor, and respect for others and, above all, with the overall aim of building up and maturing others to the maximum effect. Those gifts that have that outcome are those most to be desired, but even these are worse than useless if they are not exercised in love.

Love is certainly more excellent than feeling resentful and inferior because you do not have the showier and seemingly more important gifts. It is also more excellent than feeling superior and independent because you do have those gifts. And it is more excellent than trying to operate spiritual gifts in your own power in the flesh rather than in the Spirit, and for selfish purposes rather than for God’s.

The word ‘love’ (*agapē*) was relatively rare before New Testament times. The word *philia* meant ‘close friendship’ or ‘brotherly love,’ *storgē* meant ‘family affection,’ *erōs* mean ‘sexual passion, but *agapē* meant ‘others-centered concern, expressed at great personal cost.’ *Agapē* does not refer to mere sentiment, a pleasant feeling about something or someone. Nor does *agapē* mean charity, a term the King James translators carried over from the Latin and which in English has long been associated only with giving to the needy. This special word *agapē*, which through Christ takes on a unique meaning in the history of ideas, matches the uniqueness of His Incarnation and Atonement. So the writers of the New Testament began to use the word *agapē* to describe the new and radical kind of love manifested in Jesus. This chapter is itself the best definition of *agapē*.

In 13:1-7, Paul demonstrates the excellence of love in two ways. First, he compares it with the gifts and says they are worthless without love (13:1-3). Then he seems to look at life in general and the challenges it poses and concludes that life is unmanageable without love (13:4-7).

### **B. Love Is Superior to Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)**

Look at how Paul compares love with the gifts. He selects four gifts, carries them to their most spectacular expression and concludes each time that they amount to nothing apart from love. These verses list the various evidences of the Spirit’s presence and power in the church, as

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witnessed by various gifts and activities. The progression is from tongues to martyrdom, from the lesser to the greater. In this way the whole congregation, whatever their individual gifts might be, is encouraged to affirm Paul's conclusion that it is only love that can validate the exercise of any of them.

In verse 1, Paul focuses on the gifts that were especially valued by the Corinthians; in verse 2, he concentrates on those that he himself esteemed the most, and in verse 3, on those that the surrounding pagan culture would most admire. In each case, Paul portrays these gifts in superlative terms.

There is a simple format here:

If	I do or have	X
but	I have not	love
	I am	Y.

By 'love' (*agapē*), Paul means a quality of other-centered concern that looks to the genuine needs and welfare of a person or persons beyond oneself.

Employing 'I' in 13:1-3, he presents himself yet again as an example. Treading thin ice, he asks the Corinthians to compute his usefulness where he to be as superficial as man of them were.

### 1. Love Is Superior to Tongues (13:1)

*<sup>1</sup>If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

#### a) Gift of Tongues

Paul starts with the gift of tongues, not because he regarded it as the most important of all the gifts, but because the Corinthians obviously did. 'Just suppose,' he says, 'that I possessed the gift of tongues to such a degree that I not only completely outclassed the most eloquent of men but rivaled the very angels of heaven themselves.' Wouldn't it be wonderful to exercise the gift of tongues to such a marvelous degree? Paul drops the other shoe by saying if he had the gift of tongues in the superlative degree it would mean nothing apart from love.

Although *glōssa* can mean the physical organ of speech, it can also mean language—just as it does when we speak of a person's 'mother tongue.' 'Tongues,' therefore, is a legitimate translation, but 'languages' might be more a more helpful and less confusing rendering. In its context there is no doubt here that Paul includes the gift of speaking in languages. That is the gift the Corinthians prized so highly and abused so greatly. Paul's basic point is to convey the idea of being able to speak all sorts of languages with great fluency and eloquence, far above the greatest linguist or orator. There is no biblical teaching of a unique or special angelic language or dialect. In the countless records of their speaking to men in Scripture, they always speak in the language of the person being addressed. There is no indication that they have a heavenly language of their own that men could learn. Paul simply is saying that, were he to have the ability to speak with the skill and eloquence of the greatest men, even with angelic eloquence, he would be useless without love.

Paul begins with 'the tongues of men and of angels,' a gift much prized in the Corinthian church, it seems, and one that he himself exercises 'more than all of you,' as he later points out (14:18). He is not denying its authenticity or down valuing it in any way. Calvin, and man following him, suggests that this gift refers to human languages miraculously given by God and is the

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counterpart to the miracle of hearing the gospel in one's own tongue, as experienced by the crowds at Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:7-11). Others suggest that this is the explanation of the 'tongues of men,' but that the 'tongues of angels' indicate ecstatic speech, corresponding to no known earthly language. It could also be a way of expressing a superlative, as if the sentence read: 'No matter how wonderfully developed and impressive my use of the gift of tongues may be.'

'The tongues of men' are languages spoken by men. Those 'of angels' would be languages employed by God's ministering spirits among themselves. Paul is not claiming to speak in the tongues of angels, nor in all those developed on earth; he merely asks his readers to take up an imaginative challenge: suppose that he were to try to communicate in these languages, yet without affection for his listeners.

### *b) Gongs and Cymbals*

In a city of pagan worship where religious ecstasy was hugely valued as a sign of great godliness, this might well have been Paul's target. And in that case, the second part of the verse might be a reference to the practice of the pagan temple. The exercise of the gift even in the most impressive way has no more value than the hollow gong or the tinny cymbals struck in the pagan temples to wake the gods up, to call their attention, or to drive away evil spirits – all being but meaningless noise. Paul is both very bold in his challenge and very abrupt in his dismissal of something that his readers valued so highly. But if the gift was being exercised without love, he is ruthless in his condemnation. And the situation in the church revealed that this was precisely the case.

Gongs and cymbals were used in idol worship to arouse the gods, or to drive away false gods, or to excite worshipers, or all three. Whatever their purpose, it is quite clear these gongs and cymbals were incapable of producing a melody. They could only produce one tiring, monotonous sound. Paul's point is that the gift of tongues in its highest form would be, apart from love, just as tiresome as these gongs and cymbals.

In New Testament times, rites honoring the pagan deities Cybele, Bacchus, and Dionysus including speaking in ecstatic noises that were accompanied by smashing gongs, clanging cymbals, and blaring trumpets. Paul's hearers clearly got his point: unless it is done in love, ministering the gift of languages, or speaking in any other human or angelic way, amounts to no more than those pagan rituals. It is only meaningless gibberish in a Christian guise.

As far as they were concerned, if he had the gift of tongues without love, he would resemble a bronze disc or cymbal resonating when struck (*alalazō* = 'to clash' or 'to wail'; cp. Mk. 5:38). Keen to display his prowess, he would repel others. The comparison would not have been lost on the Corinthians, whose city was famed for its bronze wares. The apostle's point is that even God-given language is repulsive if exercised arrogantly.

## **2. Love Is Superior to Prophecy and Faith (13:2)**

*<sup>2</sup>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.*

### *a) Prophecy*

Next Paul takes the gift of prophecy. As far as the apostle was concerned this gift far outranked tongues (14:1), but it fares no better if it is done without love. 'Take prophecy to its highest

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expression,’ Paul says, ‘and imagine that one could actually penetrate and understand all the mysteries and have complete and exhaustive knowledge.’ But Paul says it would mean nothing apart from love.

As a second example, the apostle applies exactly the same argument to the gift that he views as the most beneficial for the church (cp. 14:1, 3). The language indicates that he is imaging the use of the gift to a superlative degree, so that *all* of God’s secrets and knowledge are revealed, understood, and passed on by the ‘prophet.’ Of course, that is not actually possible (cp. Dt. 29:29), but even if it were, without love it would be nothing. The comment has been made that it might be speaking God’s Word but it would not be in God’s tone of voice. Indeed, there is a sense in which truth without love ceases to be fully truth. The prophet who ministers in love will want to build up his hearers. He will be marked by humility and compassion rather than arrogance and assertiveness.

‘To have prophecy’ is an unusual expression, possibly leading into ‘know all mysteries and all knowledge,’ by which would be meant a total understanding of the plan of salvation. In the beginning of the next chapter Paul speaks of prophecy as the greatest of the spiritual gifts because the prophet proclaims God’s truth to people so they can know and understand (14:1-5). The apostle was himself a prophet (Acts 13:1). Continuing his hyperbole, however, Paul says that even the great gift of prophecy must be ministered in love.

Paul uses the comprehensive phrase ‘all mysteries and all knowledge’ to picture ultimate human understanding. ‘Mysteries’ may represent divine spiritual understanding and ‘knowledge’ may represent factual human understanding. In Scripture the term ‘mystery’ always signifies divine truth that God has hidden from men at some time. That spiritual understanding would count for nothing without the supreme spiritual fruit of love. Adding all ‘knowledge’ would not help. One could fathom all the observable, knowable facts of the created universe, be virtually omniscient, and he would still be nothing without love.

### *b) Faith*

Then there is the gift of faith. This is not the ‘faith’ which responds to the gospel and which makes one a believer. Rather it is that ‘faith’ which is directed towards the impossible (cp. 12:9). It refers to trusting God to do mighty things in behalf of His children. Such faith is, indeed, a gift that not all believers enjoy. But it is given to individuals to strengthen the confidence of others in God’s purposes, especially in times of testing.

What if we could possess that gift to such a great degree that we could be shuffling mountains around here and there! Wouldn’t that be wonderful? Paul seems to be echoing Jesus’ words encouraging Peter that the end of the fig tree cursed by Jesus (the Temple) was not the end of God’s good purposes (see Mk. 11:23; cp. Mt. 17:20). The ‘name it and claim it’ crowd would dance in ecstasy at the mere prospect of mountains sailing hither and thither! But Paul’s verdict is the same. Faith without love is meaningless.

Mountain-moving faith is expressed in prayer and leads to what seems to be the impossible actually happening. Surely that would be a sign of great spirituality? Not necessarily is Paul’s reply. If such faith is motivated by personal glory rather than love, then in God’s sight that person is nothing.

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If Paul had this level of faith in addition to the aforementioned capacities of prophetic gifts, he becomes suddenly the most marvelously endowed of the prophets. But if he has no love for his fellows, he remains ‘nothing,’ an encumbrance.

### 3. Love Is Superior to Mercy or Generosity (13:3)

<sup>3</sup>*If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

*Agapē* love is always self-sacrificing, but self-sacrifice does not necessarily come from love. Throughout the history of the church certain groups and movements have believed that self-denial, self-humiliation, and even self-affliction in themselves bring spiritual merit. Many cults and pagan religions place great emphasis on the giving up of possessions, on sacrifice of various sorts, and on religious acts of supposed self-effacement, self-deprivation, self-affliction, and monasticism. Even for Christians however, such things are worse than worthless without love. Without love, in fact, they are anything but selfless. The real focus of such practices is not God nor others, but self—either in the form of legalistic fear of not doing those things or for the praise and imagined blessing for doing them. The motive is self, and is neither spiritual nor loving.

Finally Paul takes up the gift of showing mercy, a gift he didn’t include in his list in chapter 12, but did include in his letter to the Romans (Rom. 12:8). ‘Suppose,’ he says, ‘someone were to take the gift of mercy to the extent that he would give up every last scrap of possessions and would give himself up as a martyr.’ Surely, such an act of supreme sacrifice would have great meaning. Paul says if it were done apart from love, it would all add up to nothing at all!

Paul’s examples here also seem to be inspired by Jesus. Giving to the poor may refer to Jesus’ reply to the rich man you inquired about eternal life. To that man Jesus said: ‘Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor’ (Mk. 10:21). The rabbis taught that people did not ever need to give more than twenty percent, so Paul’s illustration suggested unheard of generosity. Regarding martyrdom, perhaps Jesus’ example whereby he was handed over provided a model that some felt they must imitate. But self-sacrifice can be self-seeking. Unless genuine love for others underlies the act of martyrdom there is no profit, says Paul.

In saying ‘if I deliver my body to be burned,’ some interpreters believe that the apostle was referring to becoming a slave, the mark of which was a brand made with a hot iron. But in keeping with the extremes he has been using in these verses, it is best to assume he was referring to being burned alive. When persecution of the early church became intense, some believers actually sought martyrdom as a way of becoming famous or of gaining special heavenly credit. But when sacrifice is motivated by self-interest and pride it loses its spiritual value.

Finally, Paul turns to those external marks of religious conviction that the pagan would always value highly. Giving to those in need may be done in order to acquire merit, or attract attention but without love nothing is gained. Even martyrdom would be without value if it were endured without love. If his sacrifice is for personal gain, lacking love for others, he will be ‘profited in nothing.’ All these activities could be merely external, but God is always concerned with the heart.

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### 4. Love Is Superior

The point is that one could include any spiritual gift, activity, or service in these verses and the proposition would always remain true. Only love matters, and without love there can be nothing of value. The message is therefore plain. The spiritual life of an individual, or of a congregation, is measured not by gifts or busy activity, not by size and impact, not by commitment to sound doctrine or keenness to experience God's power, but love.

It is not simply that our service to the Lord is diminished and impaired by lack of love, but rather that there is no service to the Lord without love. No matter how highly acclaimed and applauded we may be among men, we are absolutely nothing without love.

It is not the gifts that are being criticized here, but the individuals who exercise them without love. The lesson we all have to learn is that the existence and use of spiritual gifts are not in themselves the mark of genuine spirituality. It is only the controlling presence and motivation of love that denotes the presence of God's Spirit.

### C. Love Is a Portrait of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

This second strand of Paul's exposition personifies 'love,' depicting the character traits of the believer who manifests this virtue.

Paul gives us fifteen characteristics of love, characteristics that tame the beast that lies within us and enable us to cope with the same beast crouching in others. A quick glance at these characteristics reveals each one had special relevance to the Corinthians. Paul didn't just pick these out of the air. The Corinthians were, at this particular point in their lives, exhibiting the very opposite of these traits.

Unlike most English translations, which include several adjectives, the Greek forms of all these properties are verbs. They do not focus on what love is so much as on what love does and does not do. *Agapē* love is active, not abstract or passive. It does not simply feel patient, it practices patience. It does not simply have kind feelings, it does kind things. It does not simply recognize the truth, it rejoices in the truth. Love is fully love only when it acts (cp. 1 Jn. 3:18).

One of the striking characteristics of the passage is that it is so strong on the negatives – what love is not. This is because the love of Christ is the polar opposite of our sinful, self-centered human nature, and also because this is a corrective passage to the particular denials of love on show in the church of Corinth. Imagine how the embarrassment and shame of the Corinthian congregation would have increased when they first heard this apostolic indictment of their loveless practice.

#### 1. What Love Is (13:4a)

<sup>4</sup>*Love is patient and kind...*

##### a) *Patient*

Love is 'long-suffering.' That simply means love is patient, or slow to anger. It enables us to put up with all that is distasteful and trying in others, being up with whatever it takes to go on serving Christ and His body.

'Long-suffering' (*makrothumia* – 'slow to anger') is a quality of God, closely connected to mercy (e.g. Ps. 103:8). It is a metaphorical word, literally 'long burning,' as of a decent log

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burning for many hours in an open fire, as contrasted with light pine kindling that fizzes and sputters, sending showers of sparks in all directions. It is similar to ‘patience,’ though not the stoical, resigned kind so much as the active and deliberate determination to await the hand of God’s intervention.

This word is common in the New Testament and is used almost exclusively of being patient with people, rather than with circumstances or events. Love’s patience is the ability to be inconvenienced or taken advantage of by a person over and over again and yet not be upset or angry. In the Greek world self-sacrificing love and non-avenging patience were considered weaknesses, unworthy of the noble man or woman. But God’s love is the very opposite. Its primary concern is for the welfare of others, not itself, and it is much more willing to be taken advantage of than to take advantage, much less to avenge. Love does not retaliate.

### *b) Kind*

Love is ‘kind.’ It is gracious and tender. It is actively doing good to those who do you harm. To be kind means to be useful, serving, and gracious. It is active goodwill. It not only feels generous, it is generous. It not only desires others’ welfare, but works for it. Like Jesus, it is touched and moved by the needs of the poor, sick, and downtrodden. God is also called ‘kind’ (*chrēstos*), as in Psalm 34:8.

## 2. What Love Is Not (13:4b-6)

*...love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant<sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;<sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.*

This is by no means a random catalogue, but very pointed in terms of the unsavory behavior of the Corinthians that has emerged already in the course of this letter.

### *a) Does Not Envy*

Envy is that sullen feeling of disappointment when another’s success or prosperity surpasses our own. Love enables us to be happy when others are blessed. Love is glad to receive God’s good gifts and to use them to strengthen others and glorify the Giver.

Love and jealousy are mutually exclusive. Jealousy, or envy, has two forms. One form says, ‘I want what someone else has.’ That sort of jealousy is bad enough. A worse kind says, ‘I wish they didn’t have what they have.’ The second sort of jealousy is more than selfish; it is desiring evil for someone else. It is jealousy on the deepest, most corrupt, and destructive level.

‘Jealousy’ (*zeloō*) recalls Paul’s earlier ‘there is *jealousy* and strife among you’ (3:3), referring to their factions. The root meaning of the Greek word is ‘to have a strong desire,’ and is the term from which we get ‘zeal.’ It is used both favorably and unfavorably in Scripture. Here the meaning is clearly unfavorable, which is why 12:31, part of the immediate context, should be taken as a *statement of fact* (‘you are now earnestly desiring the greater, or showier, gifts’) and not a *command to seek* ‘the greater gifts.’

### *b) Does Not Boast*

Love ‘does not parade itself.’ It doesn’t allow us to put ourselves on display and to live for the notice and applause of men. It does not boast or brag about itself, or about what it has or has achieved. Love is self-effacing, not superior and brash.

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‘Showing off’ (*perpereuomai*, ‘to brag’), is used nowhere else in the New Testament and means to talk conceitedly. Love does not parade its accomplishments. Bragging is the other side of jealousy. Jealousy is wanting what someone else has. Bragging is trying to make others jealous of what we have. Jealousy puts others down; bragging builds us up.

Paul’s use of this Greek word here echoes the Corinthians’ ‘boastful’ attitudes related, among other things, to their pride in their party leaders (e.g., 4:7). The Corinthian believers were spiritual show-offs, constantly vying for public attention. They clamored for the most prestigious offices and the most glamorous gifts. They all wanted to talk at once, especially when speaking ecstatically. Most of their tongues-speaking was counterfeit, but their bragging about it was genuine. They cared nothing for harmony, order, fellowship, edification, or anything else worthwhile. They cared only for flaunting themselves.

### c) *Is Not Arrogant*

Love ‘is not puffed up.’ It isn’t arrogant or conceited. Proud Christians are self-confident in their knowledge, by which they can put others down. Loving Christians long to build others up.

‘Puffed up’ (*phusioō*) depicts haughtiness, which earlier in the letter was specifically given as a counterpoint to love (8:1). The many other references to this inflated attitude suggest this behavior was a Corinthian characteristic (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2).

Everything good that the Corinthians had came from the Lord, and they therefore had no reason to boast and be arrogant. Yet they were puffed up and conceited about their knowledge of doctrine, their spiritual gifts, and the famous teachers they had had. They were so jaded in their pride that they even boasted about their carnality, worldliness, idolatry, and immorality, including incest, which was not even practiced by pagans (5:1). They were arrogant rather than repentant; they bragged rather than mourned.

### d) *Is Not Rude*

Love ‘does not behave rudely,’ in the sense of not behaving towards others in an unChristlike way, taking advantage of them or riding roughshod over them. It is too gentle and sensitive to even consider doing anything that will bring shame or embarrassment to another.

Love ‘does not act unbecomingly.’ The principle here has to do with poor manners, with acting rudely. It is not as serious a fault as bragging or arrogance, but it stems from the same lovelessness. It does not care enough for those it is around to act becomingly or politely. It cares nothing for their feelings or sensitivities. The loveless person is careless, overbearing, and often crude.

William Barclay translates our text as, ‘Love does not behave gracelessly.’ Love is gracious. Graciousness should begin with fellow believers, but it should not end there. Many Christians have forfeited the opportunity for witnessing by rudeness to an unbeliever who offends them by a habit the Christian considers improper.

‘Unseemliness’ (*aschēmoneō*) has a parallel in Paul’s call that everything in the assembly is to be done ‘decently’ (*euschēmōnōs* – 14:40). This is not merely aesthetic, however, but an implied rebuke to prophets and tongues speakers who want to parade their gifts – with chaotic consequences as they speak while others are still speaking.

The Corinthian Christians were models of unbecoming behavior. Acting unseemly was almost their trademark. Nearly everything they did was rude and unloving. Even when they came

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together to celebrate the Lord's Supper they were self-centered and offensive (11:21). During worship services each one tried to outdo the other in speaking in tongues. Everyone talked at once and tried to be the most dramatic and prominent. The church did everything improperly and in disorder, the opposite of what Paul had taught them and now advised them against (14:40).

### *e) Does Not Insist on Its Own Way*

Love 'does not seek its own.' The root of evil fallen human nature is in wanting to have its own way, but love isn't selfish. It doesn't insist on its own way but constantly insists on seeking the well-being of others. Gifts are given to build up God's church, not a human's ego.

'Seek its own' (*zēteō*) has an exact parallel in those Corinthians who seek not their neighbors' good, that is, their salvation, but who pursue their own selfish interests (10:24, 33).

Again, the Corinthian believers were models of what loving Christians should *not* be. They were selfish in the extreme. They did not share their food at love feasts, they protected their rights to the point of suing fellow believers in pagan law courts, and they wanted what they thought were the 'best' spiritual gifts for themselves. Instead of using spiritual gifts for the benefit of others, they tried to use them to their own advantage. They did not use their gifts to build up the church but to try and build up themselves.

### *f) Is Not Irritable*

Love 'is not provoked.' It isn't irritable, temperamental, touchy, thin-skinned, or easily offended. It is 'not exasperated,' meaning almost literally that it 'does not go into paroxysms.' Love has a long fuse.

The Greek *paroxunō*, here translated 'provoked,' means to arouse to anger and is the origin of the English 'paroxysm,' a convulsion or sudden outburst of emotion or action. Love guards against being irritated, upset, or angered by things said or done against it. It 'is not provoked.'

The being provoked that Paul is talking about here has to do with things done against us or that are personally offensive. Love does not get angry at others when they say or do something that displeases us or when they prevent us from having our own way. Love never reacts in self-defense or retaliation. Being 'provoked' is the other side of seeking one's own way. The person who is intent on having his own way is easily provoked, easily angered.

### *g) Is Not Resentful*

Love 'thinks no evil.' It doesn't keep a ledger of all the wrongs that have been done to it with a view of getting even. Love wipes the slate clean, because Jesus did so, by His cross.

'Love does not take into account a wrong suffered.' *Logizomai* ('take into account') is a bookkeeping term that means to calculate or reckon, as when figuring an entry in a ledger. The same Greek word is used often in the New Testament to represent the pardoning act of God for those who trust in Christ Jesus (Rom. 4:8; 2 Cor. 5:19; Acts 3:19). The purpose of the entry is to make a permanent record that can be consulted whenever needed. In business that practice is necessary, but in personal matters it is not only unnecessary but harmful. Keeping track of things done against us is a sure way to unhappiness—our own and that of those on whom we keep records. Love forgives. Resentment is careful to keep books, which it reads and rereads, hoping for a chance to get even. Love keeps no books, because it has no place for resentment or grudges.

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### *h) Does Not Rejoice at Wrongdoing*

Love ‘does not rejoice in iniquity.’ It doesn’t get any pleasure out of the failures and misfortunes of others. It is not a distinctive of love to be always tracking down and pointing out what is wrong in other’s lives. To ‘rejoice in unrighteousness’ is to justify it. It is making wrong appear right. Sometimes rejoicing in unrighteousness takes the form of hoping someone will make a mistake or fall into sin. One of the most common forms of rejoicing in sin is gossip.

### *i) Rejoices with the Truth*

Love ‘rejoices in the truth.’ Love is never opposed to the truth, nor sells it out, but is always glad to see truth win out. ‘Truth’ probably means doing what is right (cp. Jn. 3:21). Love wants to rejoice in what is right, because love’s delight is in the God who is love.

The truth Paul is speaking about here is not simply factual truth. He is speaking of God’s truth, God’s revealed Word. Righteousness is predicated on God’s truth and cannot exist apart from it. Love always rejoices in God’s truth and never with falsehood or false teaching. Love cannot tolerate wrong doctrine. It makes no sense to say, ‘It doesn’t make a great difference if people don’t agree with us about doctrine. What matters is that we love them.’ That is the basic view of what is commonly called the ecumenical movement. But if we love others it will matter a great deal to us whether or not what they believe is right or wrong. What they believe affects their souls, their eternal destinies, and their representation of God’s will, and therefore should be of the highest concern to us. It also affects the souls and destinies of those whom they influence.

### **3. What Love Does (13:7)**

*<sup>7</sup>Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Love is not naïve or gullible, but, as Calvin expresses it: ‘Love would rather be deceived by its gentleness of heart than injure a brother by suspicion. It is always ready to think the best, to put the most favorable construction on anything.’ That is why love never ceases to hope for God’s best in every life and every situation. No hardship, reversal, or rebuff can ever stop love from loving. That is why love will ultimately triumph; it never fails. It is the greatest force in the universe, because God is love. Nothing can overcome love, because nothing can overcome God.

Paul now provides four positive expressions of love, each strengthened by the word ‘all.’ These four qualities are hyperbole, exaggerations to make a point. Love does not bear, believe, hope, or endure lies, false teaching, or anything else that is not of God. By ‘all things,’ Paul is speaking of all things acceptable in God’s righteousness and will, of everything within the Lord’s divine tolerance. The four qualities listed here are closely related and are given in ascending order.

### *a) Bears All Things*

Love ‘bears all things.’ To ‘bear’ might mean to carry or even to tolerate or pass over in silence; the loving Christian will not shout out the known failings of others. It passes over in silence and keeps confidential all that is repugnant in others.

*Stegō* (‘to bear’) basically means to cover or support and therefore to protect. Love ‘bears all things’ by protecting others from exposure, ridicule, or harm. Genuine love does not gossip or listen to gossip. Love never protects sin but is anxious to protect the sinner. Love does not expose or exploit, gloat or condemn. It ‘bears’; it does not bare.

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### *b) Believes All Things*

Love ‘believes all things.’ It is always ready to see the best in others and to give them the benefit of the doubt. Love takes men at face value unless there is evidence to the contrary.

Love is not suspicious or cynical. When it throws its mantle over a wrong, it also believes in the best outcome for the one who has done the wrong—that the wrong will be confessed and forgiven and the loved one restored to righteousness. If there is any doubt about a person’s guilt or motivation, love will always opt for the most favorable possibility. Love trusts, love has confidence; love ‘believes.’

### *c) Hopes All Things*

Love ‘hopes all things.’ It isn’t pessimistic about future relationships with those who have been troublesome in the past. It is never ready to give up on others. Love refuses to take failure as final and looks for the best possible outcome in any situation.

Even when belief in a loved one’s goodness or repentance is shattered, love still ‘hopes.’ When it runs out of faith it holds on to hope. As long as God’s grace is operative human failure is never final. God would not take Israel’s failure as final. Jesus would not take Peter’s failure as final. Paul would not take the Corinthians’ failure as final. There are more than enough promises in the Bible to make love hopeful.

### *d) Endures All Things*

Love ‘endures all things.’ It has steadfast fortitude. It refuses to be conquered and dismayed. To ‘endure’ means to accept patiently hardship or even persecution.

*Hupomenō* (‘to endure’) was a military term used of an army’s holding a vital position at all costs. Every hardship and every suffering was to be endured in order to hold fast. Love holds fast to those it loves. It ‘endures all things’ at all costs. It stands against overwhelming opposition and refuses to stop bearing or stop believing or stop hoping. Love will not stop loving.

Love bears what otherwise is unbearable; it believes what otherwise is unbelievable; it hopes in what otherwise is hopeless; and it endures when anything less than love would give up. After love bears it believes. After it believes it hopes. After it hopes it endures. There is no ‘after’ for endurance, for endurance is the unending climax of love.

## 4. Who Love Is Not

Think of how the apostle has had to describe the Corinthians already. They were ‘of the flesh...infants in Christ,’ because ‘there is jealousy and strife among you’ (3:1-3). They were ‘puffed up in favor of one man against another’ (4:6). ‘Some are arrogant,’ brash and boastful in speech (4:18-20). There was immorality in the church ‘of a kind that is not tolerated even among the pagans ... and you are arrogant’ (5:1-2). They were taking their disputes against one another to the pagan courts for judgment, holding on to grievances; keeping a record of wrongs; brother going to law against brother. All this indicated that it was ‘already a defeat for you’ (6:1-7). They were puffed up by knowledge and by forcing this knowledge upon their weaker brothers they were compromising their consciences and causing them to stumble (8:1-3). They were abusing the Lord’s Table, not valuing one another as members together of the one body (11:17-22), despising the less advantaged and looking down on them as not worth bothering about (12:21-26).

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Put all that alongside chapter 13 and you will understand why Paul had to write it. Their behavior record was the polar opposite of Christian love. All their gifts and experiences, all their wisdom and knowledge, were therefore reduced to zero, because the church was not characterized by love. It was a stinging rebuke to the Corinthian values, and simply testifies to their immaturity: ‘infants in Christ.’ What would Paul say to the divided congregations of the twenty-first century? Would he not tell us also to grow up?

### 5. Who Love Is

To change the metaphor, Paul is painting a portrait of love, and Jesus Christ is sitting for the portrait. He lived out in perfection all of these virtues of love. This beautiful picture of love is a portrait of Him.

That list of characteristics pretty well covers every area of life! If we live in love, we shall be able to meet all that life throws at us! But how can we ever live like this? We must realize that what we have in these fifteen characteristics is nothing less than a composite picture of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. If we want to have these characteristics in our lives, we must have Him in our lives (cp. 1 Jn. 4:7, 10).

In verses 4-7 the word ‘love’ is the subject of various verbs, positive and negative. ‘Love does this, does not do that. In fact, Paul appears to be speaking about love *as a person*. Who is that person? Most likely Paul is thinking of Jesus Himself, who is love personified. Remember, Paul introduced this passage with the words, ‘I will point out a yet more excellent *way*’ (12:31). Jesus is that ‘way,’ the way of love.

Knowing Christ doesn’t mean we shall love perfectly. The Corinthians proved that. Being a Christian is not the same as being perfect. Sin still resides in the Christian’s nature and he has constantly to struggle against it. But we can be sure of one thing: no one who does not know Christ has the slightest hope of resembling this picture of Him.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.