

From The Pulpit Of



IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH

Love

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Series: 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 12:31b – 13:13

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Text

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

13 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

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. 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.

4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

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. 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.

13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Introduction

Today we come to some of the most elegant and beautiful words in the whole Bible. Gordon Fee, a NT scholar, remarks, “This is one of the most beloved passages in the New Testament, and for good reason. It is one of Paul’s finest moments: indeed, let the interpreter beware lest too much analysis detract from its sheer beauty and power.”¹ I feel the weight of that warning. I don’t want to obscure the beauty of this text with my added words. I cannot improve this, but I do want to help you linger in it and let it grip you and move you.

Paul says at the end of ch. 12 – “And I will show you a still more excellent way.” Love is a most *excellent* reality. Don’t you love love? When is the last time you can remember feeling truly loved? I think we can all resonate with the words of Marvin Gaye, later reprised by James Taylor –

How sweet it is to be loved by you...
How sweet it is to be loved by you...

I needed the shelter of someone’s arms
And there you were
I needed someone to understand my ups and downs
And there you were

With sweet love and devotion
Deeply touching my emotion

This is seen in romantic love. It's also found in parental love. It even applies to brotherly love. How sweet it is to be loved! Ultimately, it's encountered in divine love.

What love songs come to your mind? The Beatles – “All you need is love.” Burt Bacharach – “What the world needs now is love, sweet love.” Queen – “Can anybody find me, somebody to love?” Love is powerful. As the Song of Songs poetically puts it – “[L]ove is strong as death... Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it” (Songs 8:6-7). We've been singing about it forever. It's a universal theme throughout all cultures, all times. It's often confused for lust. It's often shallow and short-lived, but whatever ounce of love we've experienced is tapping into a primal need we all know very well – the need to be loved and to love. And when we get close to it, it's powerful. We're all longing for love even though it's hard to accept and hard to give. But we know it's there and we ache for it.

Naturalistic materialism tries to tell us that love is just a biological adaption with a neurochemical explanation? But can you really believe that? Can you really live like that? Atheist Richard Dawkins says that the universe is just “electrons and selfish genes;” that's it! Therefore “there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.”² In other words, there is no such thing as love. But we all know better. We all have at least a vague notion that there is a thing called love. We can't shake it. We want it. But it's elusive. We know we should practice it. But we fall short. We need something more than pop songs and fuzzy feelings.

Thankfully, God has defined love for us. We don't have to grope and hope blindly. He's revealed clearly what this thing called love is. He's put his finger on it. 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most extensive treatments of the topic. So let's look at it together and in short what we're going to see is just this: **the kind of love the Bible talks about is amazing!**

Let's pray...

Context

The kind of love the Bible talks about is amazing! Have you felt it?

Paul's been talking about spiritual gifts in the church, likening the Christian community to a body with different parts. He's just made the point that no one can do it all. We all need each other.

The Corinthians had fixated on certain gifts and manifestations of the Spirit that they deemed sensational – *Oooh, if I could do that too then I'd be special; I'd be somebody*. This has been the issue he's been coming back to all along in this letter – these Corinthian Christians were still acting very self-centeredly. The factions, the lawsuits, the flaunting of their freedom, the debacle of the Lord's Table where people were helping themselves first and eating all the food without waiting for others to have some. And now spiritual gifts – people wanting the flashy ones that would draw attention to themselves. And Paul says, “[Now let me] show you a... more excellent way” (12:31b). More excellent. And then he launches into this this soul stirring exploration of

love. And it ends with – “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (v. 13). More excellent... greatest. **The kind of love the Bible talks about is amazing!**

Again, I really don’t want to complicate the beauty of this passage with over-analysis. But as I look at it, the text seems to fall elegantly into three sections – vv. 1-3, vv. 4-7, and vv. 8-13. And I want to give these three sections apophatic headings, that is, three descriptions of what love is *not*. Love is not a formality. Love is not a feeling. And love is not fleeting. Not a formality, a feeling, or fleeting.

Love Is not a Formality (vv. 1-3)

First, in vv. 1-3 we see that love is not a formality. There’s a fullness to it, not an empty shell. Christianity is not just about externals or activities. It involves that, but not just that. The externals must come from an internal compulsion, force, motivation called love. This is indispensable. Love is not a formality, a show, a merely going through the motions.

Paul begins with the spiritual gift that the Corinthians seemed to be most impressed by – the gift of speaking in tongues. We’re going to look more at what that was next week. But here Paul essentially says, “If you speak in tongues and everybody thinks you sound so cool, but you aren’t operating out of love, you’re just squawking.” He says, “If I speak in tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” There’s something more than just impressive displays of spirituality. Real spirituality is something much deeper. It requires love, genuine care and concern for others.

Some people have taken this phrase – “tongues of angels” – and thought it means that tongue speaking can involve a non-human, heavenly language. That’s not what Paul’s communicating here. He’s simply using hyperbolic language as a way of getting his point across. He’s saying, “You could have the most spectacular gifts, but without love it’s pointless.” I say that because he continues to use hyperbole in the next two verses.

Verse 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.” You see: he’s giving the most extreme examples of the spiritual gifts that he’s been mentioning in ch. 12. And he’s saying, “Even if you have the most impressive display of these gifts, but didn’t love people in exercising them, you have nothing.” This indicts charismatics who exhibit big, flashy gifts on a stage, but are jerks off-stage. It also should convict more staid, theological types who think they have superior knowledge and have crammed heads, but cold hearts.

We all have seen people who were very gifted, but were lacking in genuine love. And we’ve seen people who were not very gifted, but who deeply cared. Paul is saying we should value the latter over the former any day. And yet we’re so prone to look on the outside, to judge superficially, to prize competence over character. But spiritual gifts without spiritual fruit are pointless. We should focus more on spiritual fruit instead of spiritual gifts. The fruit of the Spirit is listed in Galatians 5. There Paul speaks of nine character qualities that the Spirit produces in those he indwells. And what is the first one? Love. “[L]ove, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). We should be seeking to cultivate love in our hearts more

than acquiring skills. Tom Schreiner writes, “The fundamental indication of spiritual maturity is not gifts but love.”³

And then in v. 3 Paul continues in the same vein – “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” Here he moves from spiritual gifts to acts of religious devotion. What he’s saying is that it’s possible to do pious things like give crazy amounts of money to the poor or even sacrifice yourself, but from wrong motives – to feel good about yourself, to feel better than others, to put God in your debt, to impress people, to try to atone for your sins. And it can look spiritual, but if it’s not done in true love for God and for others, then it doesn’t help you in the least.

The point Paul is making in these first three verses is that love is something different than formalism. There are a lot of people who have a form of godliness (2Tim. 3:5), but it’s not animated by the power of love. People can be fake. Don’t put too much stock in spiritual gifts or even spiritual activities. Look for love. Real, deep love. It’s not a formality. Have you felt it? People can look spiritual and not have it. It’s more than just doing things. It’s heartfelt. But that’s not it. What more can we say about love?

Love Is not a Feeling

In vv. 4-7 we see that love is not just a feeling. It’s something more like a fealty or fidelity. It’s an earnest commitment that sticks with others even when it’s not convenient or advantageous. Love isn’t just an ephemeral emotion, something you fall into or out of. So many people don’t get this and cheapen love. In romantic love it’s easy to say, “I love you,” but marry me, and keep your vows for better or for worse, until death do us part. Or another person may profess to be loving, but won’t become a member of a church with real people and keep the membership covenant.

Here in this middle section Paul defines love with more specificity than a gooshy feeling. Our English translations make love the subject, followed by the verb is, followed by a predicate adjective. But really the English adjectives in Greek are verbs. Love waits patiently, love shows kindness, love doesn’t envy... Love does things (or doesn’t do things). It’s not just a feeling. It’s not just a concept. It takes on flesh and blood and is seen in action.

We could drill down into each of these descriptors of what love does or doesn’t do, but I want to go somewhat quickly so you get the overall impression.

Love is patient. It doesn’t give up on people. It’s in it for the long-haul and pushes through boredom and frustration. It means you put up with people’s “weaknesses, foibles, and idiosyncrasies.”⁴

Love is kind. It’s not mean, short-tempered, quick to cancel or cut-off, but full of mercy and forgiveness and compassion. It’s tender and sympathetic and can honestly weep with those who weep.

Love does not envy. It’s doesn’t get upset when someone else is successful but truly rejoices with those who rejoice. A loving person doesn’t compare herself with others. She’s not in a competition, but truly wants others to flourish and is committed to their good.

Love does not boast. Love gives quietly and doesn’t toot its own horn. It doesn’t try to draw attention to self, but constantly puts the focus on others.

Love is not arrogant. Literally, “puffed up.” Paul’s used this word a few times before in this letter (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2). The image depicts someone with an inflated ego that sucks up the oxygen in the room instead of giving out.

Love is not rude. A loving person does not go off on others, is not biting or harsh or critical. The idea behind the word is something like not dishonoring.

Love does not insist on its own way. In other words, it is not self-seeking. I’m always right. I always have to win. I’m looking out for what’s in it for me. Rather, love means letting go of your rights, inconveniencing yourself, putting others first.

Love is not irritable. Do you get easily perturbed? When you talk about someone else is there a hint of frustration in your tone? Love is not easily angered or annoyed.

Love is not resentful. I really like the NIV – “keeps no record of wrongs.” Are you keeping a tally, a list of grievances and hurts? Or do you have a short memory and forgive and forget? I’ve seen so many people run from relationships because they keep nursing old wounds and can’t let stuff go.

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. This corrects so many prevalent mistaken ideas of love these days. We must not confuse love with affirmation. If someone is in sin, it’s not loving to confirm them in it. Love grieves over others people’s sin for what it does to God’s glory and how it harms the person. And so love will confront.

And finally, love rejoices with the truth. Love goes hand in hand with truth. It’s not just an amorphous, mushy feeling that shies away from the sharp edges of truth. It delights in others delighting in God’s Word.

Verse 7 wraps this section up – “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” As one person has said, “it does not forsake people when life is arduous and one’s energy is taxed.”⁵ Love is not a feeling that comes and goes. It’s a settled, sustained determination to live for the good of specific other people that you stick with, sacrifice for, never give up on, and truly desire the best for. **This is the kind of love the Bible talks about.** Have you felt it?

Paul talks about it all over the place, like Colossians 3:12-14 – “Put on... compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.... And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Isn’t that what you want for yourself – undeserved, unconditional, unswerving affection and commitment? Is that what you’re extending to others, in your romantic relationship, in your family relationships, in your friendships?

Love Is not Fleeting

The kind of love the Bible talks about is amazing. Its not a formality. It’s not a feeling. And it’s not fleeting. Verse 8 says, “Love never ends.” Other translations have “never fails.” It means that love is forever. It is a reality that literally lasts eternally.

Paul says, “As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.” These gifts won’t last forever. “For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.” What’s Paul talking about – when the perfect comes? He’s talking about the Second Coming of Christ to finally usher in eternal bliss; he’s talking about Heaven, the New World. Then we won’t need the gifts to build up the church and advance the

mission. The church will be completed, the mission accomplished. We won't need people to give us messages from God. We'll see the full picture.

In v. 11 Paul uses the analogy of childhood vs. adulthood. "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." It's like we're children now, playing with the little toys that God gives us. But when Jesus comes and transforms our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body we will be like grown-ups. We'll leave our toys behind and enjoy the finer pleasures that kids can't really comprehend.

Or in v. 12 he uses the analogy of a looking glass. These were made of polished bronze in those days. I've been to Corinth and seen examples in a museum there. They were not quite as clear as our mirrors today. Paul says, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully." Not everything makes sense now, but one day it will be crystal clear.

All this is to say that the things the Corinthians were obsessing over now are nowhere near as important as love. These things will become obsolete one day, unnecessary when we get to Heaven. But love... love will go on, forever and ever. In heaven we won't need prophets, we'll be in the presence of Christ! We won't need teachers, we'll be able to ask Jesus anything. We won't need any of those spiritual gifts. But love... love will persist.

We will continue to love each other. Part of heaven is being reunited with those we loved here on earth who are also in Christ. W.H. Auden (1907-1973) in a poem called "Funeral Blues" wrote –

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

But for those who don't idolize people, but worship Christ, we will continue to have loving relationships with fellow believers for all eternity. Love does last forever, in Heaven. What an **amazing** thought. We are not just a random collection of atoms that expire and are no more. We are eternal souls that can receive and give love and who can go on doing that forever and ever.

Love is the summary of the Law (Rom. 13:10). It's the aim of Paul's charge (1Tim. 1:5). Jonathan Edwards in his famous 16-part sermon series on 1 Corinthians 13 called "Charity and Its Fruits" showed that love is the one virtue that is "more insisted on" than any other in the NT.⁶ And his final sermon in that volume on these verses in 1 Corinthians 13 was entitled "Heaven Is a World of Love." Love is not fleeting. It will go on, and on, an on and grow, and grow, and grow.

The kind of love the Bible talks about is amazing! It's not a formality. It's not a feeling. It's not fleeting. Oh, it's so beautiful. Have you experienced it? Have you ever known someone else truly caring for you, entering into your pain when they didn't have to, taking the time to listen and speak truth, sticking with you? It's **amazing**, isn't it? It's powerful, disarming, transforming.

But where does this love come from? Paul's been talking about human love for other humans in this section. There is a real possibility in the body of Christ for real love.

But it's not automatic. We're still selfish sinners. Where is the source of this love ultimately found?

In the last line of v. 12 Paul points us to the answer. He's speaking of the perfection of Heaven. He says, "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, *even as I have been fully known.*" What's he talking about there? Who has known him fully his whole life? What love does Paul know has been underlying everything all along and will continue on into eternity? It is, no doubt, the love of God, the deepest, greatest, most real love of all, of which any true love is but a diffusion of, like rays from the sun.

Love Is not a Figment of Our Imaginations

Lastly, I want to tell you that love is not a figment of our imagination. Love is undeniably seen in a figure of human history, a real person. The Trinitarian God who is Love (1Jn. 4:8), sent the Beloved Son to enter our plight, to take on human flesh and dwell among us. Look at the life of Jesus recorded in the Gospels and you see a man who truly loved. It wasn't a formality. It was from the heart. It wasn't a mere feeling. He followed through. And it isn't fleeting. He has joined himself to his Body, his Bride, the Church forever.

We can replace the word "love" in this text with the name "Jesus" and it fits him to a T. "Jesus is patient and kind; Jesus does not envy or boast; Jesus is not arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way; Jesus is not irritable or resentful; Jesus does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Jesus never ends." Jesus perfectly loves us. Other people's love for us is only a faint glimmer of God's love.

So don't take this chapter as mere admonishment to do better, love more. As Paul Miller says, "Love begins not with loving, but with being loved... we can only give what we have received."⁷ And we can only receive a pure version of it from God himself. As the Apostle Paul puts it – "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Or as the Apostle John puts it – "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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1Jn. 4:10-11). A few verses later he says these famous line – "We love because he first loved us" (1Jn. 4:19).

Oh, Nathan is not patient and kind; Nathan is full of envy and boasting; Nathan is often arrogant and rude. Nathan regularly insists on his own way; Nathan is irritable and resentful; Nathan has rejoiced at wrongdoing, instead of with the truth. I am so far from the ideal of love. And yet, Jesus loves me, this I know. "Love to the loveless shown!"⁸ I've experienced supernatural love shown to me through God's people lately and it's **amazing**, but it's also convicting, because I see how much I don't love other people. How much I just love myself. I am unworthy of love. But isn't that the point? God shows me his love nonetheless. **The love the Bible talks about**, the love of God in Christ for sinners like me, **is amazing**. You can't find it anywhere else. Certainly not in atheism. Not in any other religion or philosophical system. Not like this.

Listen to these words from Leon Morris, remarking on this remarkable passage of 1 Corinthians 13:

Christians thought of love as that quality we see displayed in the cross. It is a love for the utterly unworthy, a love which proceeds from a God who is love. It is a love lavished upon others without a thought whether they are worthy to receive it or not. It proceeds rather from the nature of the lover, than from any merit in the beloved. The Christian who has experienced God's love to him while he was yet a sinner has been transformed by the experience.⁹

Have you experienced it? Have you felt the love of God for you? You who have spurned and ignored his love? Who have turned his gifts into ways to live for yourself? Who have loved idols instead and who have used people for yourself? Do you know God's love for you in giving his only Son to take away make you his beloved child? "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1Jn. 3:16; NIV). It's not a figment of our imagination; it's a fact of history, a fundamental reality.

The Lord's Table

Our Confession of Faith (which we'll be going through in Adult Sunday School right after the service today) says this – "...the Lord's Supper [is where] the members of the church by the sacred use of bread and wine, are to commemorate together the dying love of Christ." This is a great place to experience anew the **amazing** love of Christ.

As we do I think of these words from the 18th century hymn writer Isaac Watts –

How sweet and awful is the place
With Christ within the doors,
While everlasting love displays
The choicest of her stores.

While all our hearts and all our songs
Join to admire the feast,
Each of us cry, with thankful tongues,
"Lord, why was I a guest?"

Me? Why me? There is no explanation, other than love.

And this makes me think of the 17th century poet George Herbert and his poem entitled "Love" –

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here.'
Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,

I cannot look on Thee.’
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
‘Who made the eyes but I?’

‘Truth, Lord; but I have marr’d them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.’
‘And know you not,’ says Love, ‘Who bore the blame?’
‘My dear, then I will serve.’
‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’
So I did sit and eat.

Today, instead of getting up and coming forward to receive the bread and wine, just sit down and let it be served to you. If you’re not a baptized member of this church or another gospel-preaching church, please let it pass, but use this time to ponder Christ’s love. For those eating, take the elements and hold them in your hands until we’ve all received them and we’ll eat together...

Benediction

“Let all that you do be done in love” (1Cor 16:14).

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, February 1, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 626.

² Richard Dawkins, *A River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 133.

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), 272.

⁴ Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 569.

⁵ Schreiner, 278.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005 [1749]), 1.

⁷ Paul E. Miller, *Love Walked Among Us: Learning to Love Like Jesus* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), 164.

⁸ Samuel Crossman, “My Song Is Love Unknown,” (1664).

⁹ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 [1958]), 181.