

The Imperfect Church – 24  
The Loving Church  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

### Introduction

In [A Book of Saints](#), Anne Gordon tells the story of Father Maximilian Kolbe, who was a prisoner at Auschwitz in August 1941. A prisoner escaped from the camp, and in reprisal, the Nazis ordered that ten prisoners had to die by starvation. Father Kolbe offered to take the place of one of the condemned men. The Nazis kept Kolbe in the starvation bunker for two weeks and then put him to death by lethal injection on August 14, 1941.

Thirty years later a survivor of Auschwitz described the effect of Kolbe's action: "It was an enormous shock to the whole camp. We became aware that someone among us in this spiritual dark night of the soul was raising the standard of love on high. Someone unknown, like everyone else, tortured and bereft of name and social standing, went to a horrible death for the sake of someone not even related to him.

"Therefore it is not true, we cried, that humanity is cast down and trampled in the mud, overcome by oppressors, and overwhelmed by hopelessness. Thousands of prisoners were convinced the true world continued to exist and that our torturers would not be able to destroy it.

"To say that Father Kolbe died for us or for that person's family is too great a simplification. His death was the salvation of thousands. ... We were stunned by his act, which became for us a mighty explosion of light in the dark camp."

TS - Such is the power of love. One act of true love for another can and does change the world. One act of love can soften a heart. One act of love can tear down walls between people. Love knows no barrier that can stop its power. Isn't that why we gather here today? Christians are those who fully understand and experience love's power. By the sacrifice of Jesus, love is known. At the cross, love is defined.

It is at this point in 1 Corinthians that it seems Paul takes a dramatic turn from largely negative and confrontational diatribes, to one of the most positive, gracious sections in all the Bible. Chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians is commonly referred to as the "Love Chapter," and rightly so. Yet, as we will see, it is not a dramatic turn in his confrontation of them. This chapter just may be the most lovingly harsh confrontation of them in the entire letter.

This chapter, along with passages like Jeremiah 29:11 and Philippians 4:13, is among the most often ripped-out-of-context sections in all the Bible. Paul did not write these words so we would have something to say at weddings. He is in the middle of a three-chapter teaching to the Corinthian Christians about their inappropriate use and abuse of spiritual gifts. Remember our overarching principle when it comes to spiritual gifts in Corinth: they were getting it wrong. We will see that clearly today.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 - If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. <sup>6</sup> It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. <sup>7</sup> Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

<sup>8</sup> Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! <sup>9</sup> Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! <sup>10</sup> But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.

<sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. <sup>12</sup> Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.

<sup>13</sup> Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

As we walk through this text seeing how the Bible defines what love really is and what love really does, we will see three big truths about love:

1. THE PREEMINENCE OF LOVE (V. 1-3)
2. THE PERSISTENCE OF LOVE (V. 4-7)
3. THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE (V. 8-13)

Paul begins this amazing chapter with one of the most powerful paragraphs in the history of the world on the importance of love, and the impact on a life that is void of it.

## 1. THE PREEMINENCE OF LOVE

Right before chapter 13 starts, he ends chapter 12 with a little statement that helps transition into this topic. After laying out all these truths about spiritual gifts, what they are and how they are to function in the church, he says this at the end of 12:31 – **But now let me show you a way of life that is best of all.**

These Corinthian Christians were dividing over their gifts, some were jealous of others, others were looking down upon those who had what they considered “lesser” gifts. It was a mess. Their usage of spiritual gifts was hurting the Church, not helping it. It seems that the motivations of those with the more “showy” gifts like speaking in tongues was selfishness and a craving for power. Paul is now going to show them a better way. When he says he is going to show them a way of life that is “best of all” he uses a word there that we all are familiar with...*hyper-bole*. Its root is the verb *ballo* that means ‘to throw.’ That same root forms the word *parable*, the stories that Jesus told. A parable is a truth that is set alongside a common image from everyday life. *Ballo – to throw, para – alongside*. Jesus often told stories or made points by saying, “Consider the birds...look at that farmer.” Truth thrown alongside life.

A *hyper-bole* then is something that is thrown high (*hyper* means up or high energy...like when your kids have too much sugar and they are hyper. Their energy is thrown high). Our usage of the word *hyperbole* today shows this...a hyperbole in English grammar is a statement that is exaggerated, pushed so high with embellishment, it is not to be taken literally. So this ‘way of life’ Paul is showing in chapter 13 is life that is *hyper*, higher, better. And ironically, as Paul begins describing this *hyper-bole* life, he uses hyperbole to describe it.

v. 1-4 - **If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn’t love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God’s secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn’t love others, I would be nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn’t love others, I would have gained nothing.**

Notice the hyperbole he uses here...to be able to speak all the languages of earth, even of angels. This is not Paul informing us that speaking in tongues as Charismatics do today is them speaking in some form of angelic tongue. He is using hyperbole to make a point. He’s making an exaggerated point. Even if I could do all that...if it were done without love, it is worthless.

Here is his first lovingly harsh confrontation of them...they have focused too far on spiritual gifts that involve speaking of some kind, like tongues and prophecy. If someone had gifts that could do unbelievably supernatural things like speak every language in the universe, if it was not done in love, it is only a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Paul is making two clear points here: first, you may have all these amazing gifts of speech, but if love isn't driving it, it is all just incoherent, annoying noise. Loud gongs and cymbals are incapable of harmony (see his point!) and if they aren't used in the proper context, they are helpful.

But his second point here is even more in their face. The pagan cults of Dionysius and Cybele were known for these fantastical experiences in their worship...ecstatic utterances as the pagan deity spoke through them, incoherent babble that was viewed as spiritual in some way. And their worship was accompanied by cymbals to welcome their deity and rouse the worshipers. So what is Paul saying? If all you are going to do is babble incoherently, you are doing nothing more than pagans do. Your worship is the same as pagan worship. You are more in line with them than you are with Christ.

Next he lists prophecy and understanding ALL (see the hyperbole) God's plans and had ALL knowledge, and even having faith to move mountains (literally translating ALL the faith to move mountains...all of those amazing abilities amount to nothing without love. He even goes one step further with this statement. Earlier he said loveless things would be meaningless like a gong or cymbal, but now he is saying those who do these good yet loveless things are nothing. Not that the things done are nothing, but the people come to nothing.

He ends by listing actions taken by people that are the epitome of sacrifice...give everything to the poor and martyrdom. The phrase 'giving everything to the poor' means giving them food to eat. It is referring to someone who liquidates all their wealth and possessions and then uses that money (all they have) to personally feed the poor bite by bite. Thousands and thousands and thousands of little sacrifices, eating away at all you own. That's quite a noble thing. Or, even more so, giving your very life. Paul even mentions these actions are so noble that they are brag-worthy. But that doesn't matter. Even the most popular and applauded actions in the world, if they are not motivated by genuine love... "I would have gained nothing." It benefits nothing at all.

That word "gained" is the same word Jesus used in Matthew 16 when he said, "What does it profit a person to gain the world yet lose their soul?"

You can spend your entire life, literally spending it (giving it away) to gain applause, a good reputation, or some other motivation. Guilt is a good motivator. Popularity is a good motivator. But if there is anything other than genuine love driving any of this, it is utterly empty. This is what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 7:

Matthew 7:21-23 - <sup>21</sup> "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. <sup>22</sup> On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' <sup>23</sup> But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'

You can do a lot of good, religious things, yet totally miss the heart of God in them. For those who do moral things for the wrong reasons...Jesus' response to you is that he does not know you.

William Barclay – "Hardly any passage in Scripture demands such self-examination as this from those who consider themselves to be good."<sup>1</sup>

And if you think you've got this love thing down, consider the next section.

## 2. THE PERSISTENCE OF LOVE

v. 4-7 - <sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. <sup>6</sup> It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. <sup>7</sup> Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

What is love? [[embed song clip](#)] Paul gives us an incredible and detailed definition of love here. To give us the full description of what love is and what love does, he gives us 15 separate concepts here. And here is what is most notable about that...none of the 15 descriptions and definitions here are adjectives...in the original language, all 15 of them are verbs. That tells us this...love is not an emotion or feeling. It is not some mysterious force you can fall into or out of.

The word that Paul uses here is the great word *agape*. Agape is most often associated with the concept of 'unconditional' love. Without deserving. Without earning. Looking at its opposite will help us here.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, [The Letters to the Corinthians](#), 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 140.

Conditional love is a love that is built on the foundation of expectation. It takes an 'if...then' form. If you are good, if you do what I want, if you show love to me, if you continue to meet my needs...then I will love you. With conditional love, emotion sits in the driver's seat. I feel love, therefore, I will show love. Since I feel the emotions of love, I will make the decision to love.

But unconditional love, agape love, works the opposite way. With agape love, decision sits in the driver's seat. Agape love begins with the act of the will to love, knowing that emotion will follow. Here is a succinct definition of love then: [Love is an act of the will, accompanied by emotion, that leads to the benefit of the one being loved.](#)

Mark Buchanan - "Agape chooses to love, not just before there is emotion, but sometimes in spite of other emotions that otherwise come naturally. It loves in the face of betrayal, in the face of rejection, in the face of evasion, in the face of rank badness. It wills love even when circumstances trigger instincts of anger or hurt, withdrawal or revenge. Agape builds its house, often, in the ruins...Agape, then, is not a because of love; it's an in spite of love. It exists free of conditions, fueled by something within itself rather than evoked by something outside itself."

He will go on to say that he believes the best way to define agape love is as an unprovoked love. Which is an unusual way to talk about love. Usually the idea of something being unprovoked comes up with phrases like unprovoked anger, or unprovoked violence. We hear news stories of innocent bystanders who are harmed by unprovoked violence. They did nothing to deserve it. They didn't do anything to provoke the person into harming them. It just happened. Unprovoked love, agape love, follows that same line of thought. The one being loved did nothing to deserve it. They didn't earn it. There was nothing done by the one being loved to provoke that love from the person giving it. This is the kind of love God shows to us. This is the kind of love God calls us to show to everyone.

That is Paul's focus here. This is what love is...because this is what love does. An act of the will, a choice, to do these things, to be this for the people around me. The emphasis he shows about love is its power to not give up. To keep going. Why is that true about love? Because it is not based on how you feel. You can always choose to keep doing these things for anyone. Here's an example:

Though Abraham Lincoln is remembered favorably by history, he wasn't always liked by his contemporaries. None more so than his Secretary for War, Edwin Stanton. Stanton called Lincoln a 'low cunning clown' and

nicknamed him 'the original gorilla,' saying to the famed explorer Paul Du Chaillu that he was fool to wander about Africa trying to capture a gorilla when he could find one so easily in Springfield, IL. But Lincoln never retaliated. He made Stanton is war minister because he was the best man for the job. Lincoln always treated him with the utmost of respect and courtesy. Year after year Lincoln chose to treat him admirably. Then the night came when a coward's bullet took the President's life. In the little room where Lincoln's body was taken, stood that same Stanton, who upon looking down at Lincoln's silent face, said through is tears, "There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen." The patient persistence of love had conquered in the end.

William Baker – "Love cannot be limited to a feeling, emotion, or even attitude or motivation. Rather, love must be lived out in real life in relationship to real people who may well be hard to get along with in the church. For love to be love, it must be shown in relationship to others within the life of the church."<sup>2</sup>

One more thing is happening here in v. 4-7...Paul is showing yet another lovingly harsh confrontation of their behavior. Each of these wonderful, inspiring acts and descriptions of love are tied to things he has already mentioned to them. Jealous is from chapter 3. Boastful is chapter 1,3,4,5. Proud is chapter 4,5. Rude is chapter 7. Self-seeking is chapter 10. Injustice is chapter 6. Dave Garland describes what Paul is doing this way: "Since virtually every behavioral problem at Corinth is mentioned in vv. 4-7, Paul seems to say that the real problem is their lack of love, for love does not behave in the way they do. The section becomes quite ironic, because while Paul is praising love, he is at the same time blaming the Corinthians."<sup>3</sup>

### 3. THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE

For those who have elevated spiritual gifts (namely the miraculous ones, and specifically speaking in tongues), what he says to them now puts these gifts in their proper place...they are temporary. These things they have viewed as the pinnacle of spiritual prowess are nothing more than temporary stop gaps to get to eternity.

v. 8-10 - <sup>8</sup> Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! <sup>9</sup> Now our

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<sup>2</sup> William Baker, "[1 Corinthians](#)," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, vol. 15 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 191-192.

<sup>3</sup> David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 607-608.

knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! <sup>10</sup> But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.

The word he uses for 'useless' means "abolish." These gifts that are so prominent to them...they aren't prominent. God is going to abolish them. They are not the epitome of spiritual maturity...at best they reveal only part of what God is trying to communicate. This is why Scripture is so important...it contains everything God wants us to know about himself, about ourselves, and about the world we live in. But the time of perfection is coming...a clear reference to eternity. These gifts that had such an important role in the Church then, and those that have an important role now, will not be part of eternity because there will be no use for them. He uses two illustrations to show the truth of that:

First, childish things belong to childhood. Adults aren't supposed to act like children. He's making two points with this. In chapter 3 he has already referred to them as children, not mature in their faith. He is telling them that their loveless actions with the gifts are what children do. Second he is telling them that things have their relevant season and then go away. Kid things are for childhood. Gifts are for life here, not life forever.

The second illustration he uses is that of a mirror, "puzzling reflections" (Greek word *enigma*). Their mirrors then are not like ours today. Their mirrors were polished bronze (a popular export of Corinth). At best you saw a dim, unclear reflection. Even today's clarity of mirrors only shows a partial reflection of a person, only the outside. But in eternity we will know all things, he says...as God fully knows us now. Then he closes with one of the most famous statements in the history of literature: v. 13 - "Three things will last forever - faith, hope, and love - and the greatest of these is love."

Why is love the greatest? Faith is important, right? We are saved by God's grace through our faith. Hope is important, right? So important that we've made it our vision here to Be Hope and Give Hope. Colossians 1 says that Hope drives faith and love. So how can love be the greatest? Because only Love in its fullest sense will go from this life into the next. In eternity faith will change. Because it will no longer be faith, it will be sight. Hope will change, because we are not postured toward the future anymore. The Lord will be with us. Only Love...God's love for us, our love for Him, and our love for those around us...only love goes into eternity. So if we want to live Heavenly, if we want God's Kingdom to be known on the Earth, if we want

God's will to be done on Earth as it is in Heaven, as we are commanded to pray in Matthew 6, the way to get that done is to love one another.

### Conclusion

I said earlier that agape love is unprovoked love. That is only partially true. Agape love is unprovoked in God. We don't deserve his love. There is nothing that we have done to earn that love, to provoke him to show it.

Tim and Missy came up to me years ago and said, "We have a theological question for you. We've already asked a couple other staff members, and we want to see if your answer matches their answers. Why does God love us?" Apparently this had been a fairly long-term, ongoing debate between the two of them. And it was legitimately causing problems in their marriage.

She wanted to believe that God loved her because she is lovely. She is worthy of love. Whether from insecurity or pride, this is where she stood her ground. He went the opposite direction. Because of his past he believed that God loved him, not because he was lovable, but because God is love. That God's own character drove his love. So who is right? Why does God love us?

He is more right, but she is not entirely wrong. We are loved because God is love. His character does drive his love for us. She is lovely and lovable. But what she failed to understand is that while she is indeed lovely, she is lovely because God chooses to love her. His love for her makes her lovely. His love for her makes her worthy. His love for her makes her infinitely valuable.

Agape love is the choice to act, not based on feelings. It is indeed unprovoked. We know that because God loves us! Agape love is unprovoked in God, but it is provoked in us...by God. We can and should show agape love to those around us, but we don't have it in us to just do that all the time. This kind of love is provoked, drawn out in us, by God himself. We can love like this because we have experienced love like this.

Romans 5:8 - "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."

1 John 3:1 - "See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!"

1 John 3:16 - "We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us."

When we are talking about agape love and showing it to the people around us, there is nothing less than the Gospel at stake. Because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, we have now experienced agape love. And since we have experienced agape love, we can now show agape love.

To see this, all we need to do is go back to v. 4-7. One of the popular things people do with these verses is replace the word 'love' with their own name. While that can serve as a nice evaluation tool, it tends to lead to discouragement. I am not always these things, I miss the mark all the time. These verses describe perfect love. Our love is never perfect. But the love we have received...that is perfect love. So instead of putting your own name in the place of love, put the name of Jesus instead.

Jesus is patient and kind.

Jesus is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude.

Jesus does not demand his own way (gave of himself on the cross).

Jesus is not irritable and keep no record of being wronged.

Jesus does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices when truth wins out.

Jesus never gives up.

Jesus never loses faith.

Jesus is always hopeful.

Jesus endures through every circumstance.

Jesus is love. And by his love invites you into relationship with himself.