SMITH FOR CHRIST

TEACHING THE WORD · LIVING IN THE LIGHT



DEEP DIVE

1 Corinthians

Chapter Thirteen, Verses 1–13

The More Excellent Way — why love is essential — the one thing without which every gift is nothing

NASB 1995 | VERSE BY VERSE | FOUR VOICES | WITH DIAGRAMS

Written for a church fight, not a wedding: Paul takes every gift Corinth prized, subtracts love and gets zero, paints love in fifteen verbs that read like a portrait of Christ, and shows that when every partial thing is done away, love alone goes on — because God is love. Read through four teachers — **David Guzik**, **R.C. Sproul**, **C.H. Spurgeon** and **Matthew Henry** — with the Greek behind Paul's key words.

THE PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 13:1–13

nothing · fifteen verbs · never fails · greatest

THE METHOD

Verse by Verse

Color-coded by teacher

WHAT'S INSIDE

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Four movements from "if I … but do not have love" to "the greatest of these is love"

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"But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love." — 1 Corinthians 13:13

SECTION I · THE PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 13:1–13

The More Excellent Way — Without love, nothing; love described in fifteen verbs; love never fails; and the greatest of these

† How to Read This Study

This study walks 1 Corinthians 13 in 4 movements, in Paul's own order. Each movement opens with the full NASB 1995 text of those verses, marked with the Berean colors and shapes; then the Greek behind the key words; then the teachers, each in his own color — **David Guzik**, the pastor who walks the text verse by verse; **R.C. Sproul**, the theologian who presses every word for its doctrine; **C.H. Spurgeon**, the preacher who turns the doctrine into a call to the heart; and **Matthew Henry**, the Puritan commentator who gathers it into plain, practical counsel. The figures draw the argument so you can see where Paul is going. Read the Scripture first; then let each voice add its angle.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word
R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries
C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle
MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

HOW THIS STUDY IS MARKED
God — His character & actions
Command / instruction
Key repeated word
Sin / warning
Promise / blessing
Time / place / contrast

KEY VERSE · 1 CORINTHIANS 13:13

"But now ☆faith, hope, love, abide these three; but △the greatest of these is love."

† Before the Passage

Chapter 13 is read at weddings, but Paul wrote it for a church fight. Chapter 12 ended with a command and a promise: "But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way" (12:31). Chapter 14 opens on the far side with "Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts" (14:1) and goes back to tongues and prophecy in the meeting. Chapter 13 is the hinge between them. The Corinthians wanted to know which gift made a man most spiritual. Paul answers that no gift does — and then describes the one thing that does.

The letter has been building to this. Corinth had every gift — "you are not lacking in any gift" (1:7) — and was known for quarrels (1:11), jealousy and strife (3:3), arrogance (4:18; 5:2), lawsuits between brothers (6:1–8), knowledge that puffed up (8:1), and a Lord's Supper where one went hungry while another got drunk (11:21). Almost every line of verses 4–7 names one of those failures. "Puffed up" (*physioō*) has already appeared five times in this letter before 13:4 calls it the opposite of love.

The word all through is *agapē* (nine times in thirteen verses in the NASB). The KJV renders it "charity," from the Latin *caritas*, to keep it clear of mere affection; Henry warns that he does not mean almsgiving but "love in its fullest and most extensive meaning, true love to God and man." The root is the Old Testament: "You shall love the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) — the two commandments on which, Jesus said, "depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:40).

The chapter moves in four steps. Verses 1–3: subtract love from the greatest gifts and sacrifices, and the total is zero. Verses 4–7: love described in fifteen verbs — not one of them a feeling. Verses 8–12: gifts belong to the partial age and will be done away; love never fails. Verse 13: faith, hope and love abide — and the greatest of these is love. Ed asked for this study to dig into *why* love is essential; the word studies, the last figure and the Interpretation notes carry that question through the whole Bible.

I
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–3

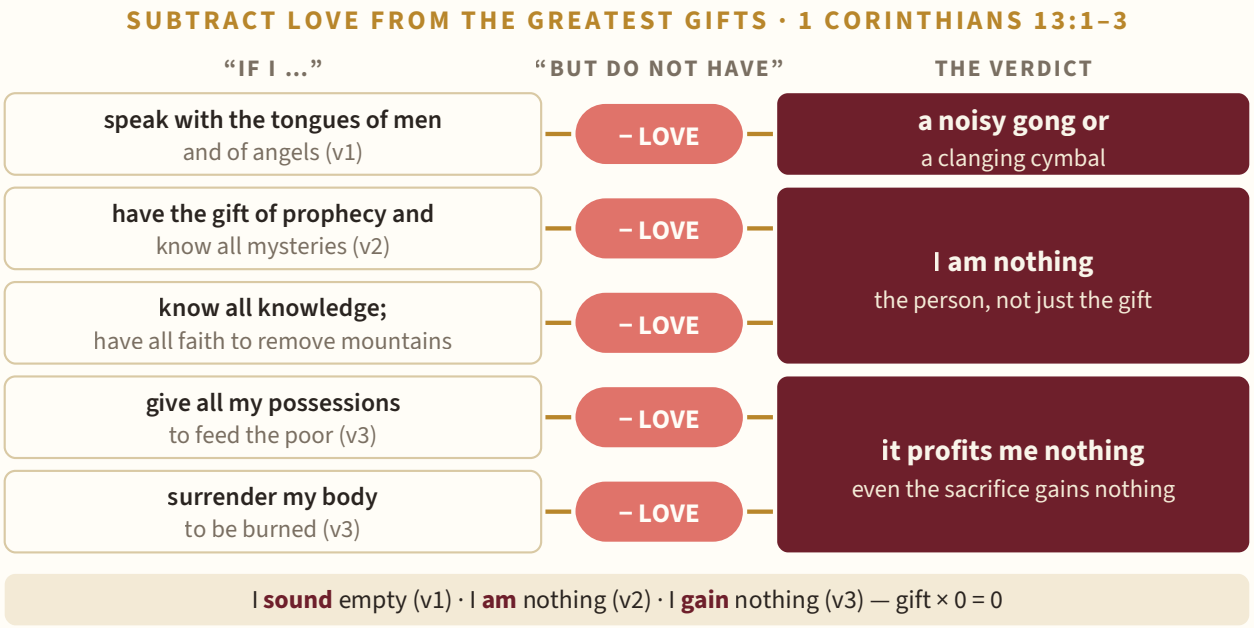
Without Love, Nothing

Corinth's greatest gifts and sacrifices, each set beside love and found empty

> [1] *If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have* ⟲ *love, I have become* ⚠ *a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.* [2] *If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have* ⟲ *love,* ⚠ *I am nothing.* [3] *And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have* ⟲ *love,* ⚠ *it profits me nothing.*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–3

> *"But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way."*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 12:31

FIGURE · GIFTS MINUS LOVE



Read each row left to right: Paul imagines every gift Corinth prized at full strength, takes away love, and the verdict grows from empty noise to "I am nothing" to "it profits me nothing."

ἀγάπη

AGAPĒ · "LOVE" · G26

The chapter's word, nine times in the NASB of these thirteen verses. Greek had other words — *erōs* (desire), *storgē* (family affection), *philia* (friendship) — and Guzik walks through all four to show why Paul chose this one: a self-giving love that "gives without demanding or expecting repayment," that can be given "to the unlovable or unappealing." It is the love of the will, which is why it can be commanded (14:1, "Pursue love"). Guzik adds a careful note: *agapē* is not automatically holy, since men are said to love darkness (John 3:19); the word alone is not the point — its source and object are. The KJV's "charity" (Latin *caritas*) tried to keep it clear of feeling; Henry insists it means "true love to God and man," not almsgiving.

κύμβαλον ἀλαλάζον

KYMBALON ALALAZON · "CLANGING CYMBAL" · G2950 · G214 (+ G5475, G2278)

Chalkos is bronze or copper — the metal of coins in a belt (Mark 6:8); *ēcheō* ("echoing, sounding") gives us "echo." *Kymbalon*, a hollow bronze basin struck against another, appears only here in the New Testament; *alalazō* is the loud wailing of the mourners in Jairus's house (Mark 5:38). Noise that is all resonance and no content. Paul does not say tongues without love *are* a gong; he says "I *have become*" one — the person turns into noise.

οὐθέν · ὠφελοῦμαι

OUTHEN · ŌPHELEŌ · "NOTHING" · "PROFIT" · G3762 · G5623

The verdicts escalate. Verse 2: not "my gift is nothing" but "I am nothing" (*outhen*, a form of *oudeis*, "no one, nothing"). Verse 3: *ōpheleō*, to profit or be of use — giving and dying gain me nothing. "Give all my possessions to feed" is *psōmizō* (G5595), to dole out in morsels — the same verb as "if your enemy is hungry, feed him" (Romans 12:20): a whole fortune given away bite by bite. In verse 3 many Greek manuscripts (and the SBLGNT) read *kauchēsōmai* (G2744), "that I may boast," for *kauthēsomai*, "to be burned" (the NASB and KJV reading). Guzik notes it; either way the point is the same — supreme sacrifice without love.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik says the Corinthians were "enamored with spiritual gifts," especially tongues, and missed the gifts' motive and goal by making them a goal in themselves. Tongues without love are "nothing but empty noise." He takes "tongues of ... angels" as a real possibility, since many Jews of Paul's day believed angels had a language. A man with mountain-moving faith but no love "will set them down right in the path of somebody else." Yet "It isn't an issue of love versus the gifts," and he cites Fee: "Possession of the charismata is not the sign of the Spirit; Christian love is." Even martyrdom — some early Christians thought it washed away sin — profits nothing without love. Every item in verses 1–3 is good; love is so valuable that apart from it every other good is useless.

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

In an excerpt from his book *What Is Love?*, Sproul notes that Paul does not condemn tongues, giving or martyrdom: "He doesn't say that these things are bad." His point is that all of them can be done without love, so none of them proves the heart — "A person can even be a martyr for the wrong reasons." He ties it to the Pharisees, careful givers who opposed God, judged by Christ "chiefly for one sin: hypocrisy." The ordinary grace of love, he concludes, is "higher than the gifts and more important than performance."

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

In his exposition of the chapter Spurgeon puts verses 1–3 to his own hearers who witness with their tongues: where there is no love to God or man, "the vital element is wanting." On verse 2 he names the warning case: "Judas had, no doubt, faith in God's miracles, but yet he was not saved" — selfishness, not love, ruled him. Gifted and boastful men are humbled by this, he says, while many who have few gifts but love God much are the accepted ones. On verse 3: "God requires the heart to be right," and if it is not, nothing that comes out of us — gifts, goods or even our bodies given to the fire — is acceptable in His sight.

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry explains that the Corinthians "seemed chiefly to value themselves and despise their brethren" over tongues, so Paul names that gift first. "It is the charitable heart, not the voluble tongue, that is acceptable with God." Of prophecy and knowledge: "A clear and deep head is of no signification, without a benevolent and charitable heart." Of mountain-moving faith: "one dram of charity is, in God's account, of much greater worth than all the faith of this sort in the world" — and he distinguishes: "Saving faith is ever in conjunction with charity, but the faith of miracles may be without it" (Matthew 7:22–23). Alms may flow from vainglory, and even burning for the truth profits nothing, for "true charity is the very heart and spirit of religion."

II
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–7

Love Described

Fifteen verbs — what love does, what it refuses to do, and what it keeps on doing

> 4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–7

FIGURE · LOVE IN FIFTEEN VERBS

	LOVE … (NASB 1995)	GREEK VERB	WHERE CORINTH FELL SHORT
1	is patient	*makrothymei*	11:33 — “wait for one another”
2	is kind	*chrēsteuetai*	8:11–12 — the weak brother wounded
3	is not jealous	*ou zēloi*	3:3 — “jealousy and strife”
4	does not brag	*ou perpereuetai*	4:7 — boasting of what was given
5	is not arrogant	*ou physioutai*	4:18; 5:2; 8:1 — puffed up
6	does not act unbecomingly	*ouk aschēmonei*	11:21 — drunk at the Supper
7	does not seek its own	*ou zētei ta heautēs*	10:24 — seek the other’s good
8	is not provoked	*ou paroxynetai*	1:11–12 — quarrels and parties
9	does not take into account a wrong	*ou logizetai*	6:7 — “why not rather be wronged?”
10	does not rejoice in unrighteousness	*ou chairei epi*	5:2, 6 — boasting over sin
11	rejoices with the truth	*synchairei*	12:26 — rejoice with the member
12	bears all things	*stegei*	
13	believes all things	*pisteuei*	
14	hopes all things	*elpizei*	
15	endures all things	*hypomenei*	

FOUR “ALL THINGS” (v7)
covers · trusts · expects · stays
9:12 — Paul: “we endure all things”
(the same verb *stegō*)

what love does · what love refuses — *All fifteen are verbs — love is what it does.*

Every description of love in vv. 4–7 is a verb, and almost every refusal names a failure Paul has already confronted in this letter.

μακροθυμεῖ · χρηστεύεται

"IS PATIENT · IS KIND" · G3114 · G5541

Makrothymeō is "long-tempered" — slow to boil with *people*, not merely with circumstances. Peter uses it of God: "patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish" (2 Peter 3:9). Guzik cites Chrysostom: it is the word for a wronged man who could easily avenge himself and will not. *Chrēsteuomai* occurs only here in the New Testament — to show oneself useful, benevolent; its root *chrēstos* describes the Most High, who "is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:35). Patience is what love refrains from when it is hurt; kindness is what it does next. Paul puts them first, and Galatians 5:22 lists them right after love as the Spirit's fruit. The KJV's "suffereth long" is the same verb.

οὐ φυσιοῦται

OU PHYSIOUTAI · "IS NOT ARROGANT" · G5448 (+ G4068)

Perpereuomai, only here in the New Testament, is the windbag's verb — to show off, to parade oneself; Henry admits its exact sense is unsettled but says "in every sense and meaning true charity stands in opposition to it." *Physioō* is to inflate with a bellows. Of its seven New Testament uses, six are in this letter: 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1 ("Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies") and here. It is the Corinthian disease, and 13:4 names it as love's opposite. Verse 4's "is not jealous" is *zēloō* (G2206), the very verb Paul used for "earnestly desire" in 12:31 and 14:1: zeal aimed at what is yours to pursue is holy; aimed at what your brother has, it is envy.

λογίζεται

LOGIZETAI · "TAKE INTO ACCOUNT" · G3049

Logizomai is a bookkeeper's verb — to reckon, enter in the ledger, impute. Love keeps no account of wrongs. It is Paul's great gospel verb: Abraham's faith "was credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3), and "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). The reason I can close the books on my brother is that God closed them on me. Guzik: literally, "love does not store up the memory of any wrong it has received." The KJV's "thinketh no evil" and Henry's "it does not reason out evil" lean to the other sense of the verb — not imagining evil motives. Paul uses the same verb again in v. 11: "reason like a child."

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik notes that Paul describes love "by action words, not by lofty concepts": "True love is always demonstrated by action." He walks the list practically — envy murdered Abel, enslaved Joseph and handed Jesus over (Matthew 27:18); "the worst pride is pride of grace!"; love does not behave rudely; being provoked is sin, and it kept Moses out of the Promised Land. "Bears all things" can mean "covers" (1 Peter 4:8), and he quotes Spurgeon's pearl oyster, which covers the grit with its own life. Love believes the best unless the facts demand otherwise. Then the test: put the name Jesus in place of love and every line fits; put in your own name and measure your maturity. "Giftedness is not the measure of maturity, the display of love is."

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

In a Tabletalk article on verse 4, Sproul says Paul puts patience and kindness first because they are central to love. Patience endures offenses over time without writing people off: "Longsuffering love does not keep a scorecard." It is rooted in God, who is slow to anger — "If not for the longsuffering of God, we would perish." "Suffering long means loving when we are experiencing hurt and pain," and kindness answers the very people who hurt us: "Kind people are not rude, not severe, not mean." Elsewhere, writing on "the judgment of charity," he commends Jonathan Edwards's *Charity and Its Fruits*, an exposition of this chapter, and warns that "we tend to reserve best-case analysis to our own motives" — love gives that reading to others.

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

Spurgeon preached verse 7 as “Love’s Labours” (No. 1617, 4 September 1881). He takes the margin’s “covereth” for “beareth”: love does not publish the faults of good men — “Love stands in the presence of a fault, with a finger on her lip.” “True love believes good of others as long as ever it can,” and when it can no longer believe, it hopes: “Love never despairs.” “Hope all things about your brethren.” And it endures, for “Love is the reverse of seeking her own.” In his exposition of verses 4–5 he gives the same counsel in one line: “Always try to put the best construction on other people’s actions.” (Guzik also quotes him: “Love does not ask to have an easy life of it: self-love makes that her aim.”)

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry calls charity “an excellent grace” and works through its properties so “that we may know whether we have this grace.” Longsuffering waits for a brother’s reformation rather than flying out in resentment; kindness “not only seizes on opportunities of doing good, but searches for them.” Love is glad of another’s good, subdues pride, keeps decency. Against temper: “Where the fire of love is kept in, the flames of wrath will not easily kindle” — “Anger cannot rest in the bosom where love reigns.” Love covers faults, not publishing them “till duty manifestly demands it,” and believes well of others — yet “Wisdom may dwell with love, and charity be cautious.” He ends with John 13:35: “Blessed Jesus! how few of thy professed disciples are to be distinguished and marked out by this characteristic!”

III
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8–12

Love Never Fails

Gifts for the partial age, love for ever — the child, the mirror and the face

8 *Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.* 9 *For we know in part and we prophesy in part;* 10 *but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.* 11 *When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.* 12 *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8–12

“With him I speak mouth to mouth, Even openly, and not in dark sayings, And he beholds the form of the LORD.”

NUMBERS 12:8

FIGURE · WHAT ENDS AND WHAT ABIDES

IN PART — NOW "will be done away" · "will cease"		THESE THREE ABIDE "But now … abide" (v13)	
gifts of prophecy	will be done away (v8)	faith	→ will become sight
tongues	will cease (v8)	hope	→ will become possession
knowledge	will be done away (v8)	LOVE "never fails" (v8) "the greatest of these" (v13) *because "God is love" (1 John 4:8)*	
we know · we prophesy	in part (v9)		
speak, think, reason	like a child (v11)		
we see in a mirror	dimly (v12)		

NOW → THEN

"when the perfect comes" (v10)

Spurgeon: faith and hope abide too

WHAT IS "THE PERFECT" (v10)? — WHERE THE TEACHERS LAND

Guzik: Christ's presence — His return or our going to Him; not the finished New Testament.
Henry: the perfect state above; yet the extraordinary gifts were "but for a time."
All agree: whatever ends and whenever, love does not — it outlasts every gift.

Everything in the left column belongs to the partial "now" and will be done away; of the three that abide, love is the greatest — and teachers who differ on "the perfect" agree on that.

οὐδέποτε πίπτει

OUDEPOTE PIPTEI · "NEVER FAILS" · G4098 · G2673 · G3973

Piptō is to fall — love never falls to the ground, never collapses. Prophecy and knowledge "will be done away" (*katargeō*, to render idle, inoperative); the same verb returns in v. 10 ("the partial will be done away") and v. 11 ("I did away with childish things"), and in 15:24, 26, where death itself is abolished. Tongues "will cease" (*pauō*, middle voice). Some cessationist teachers argue the middle voice means tongues stop of themselves, early; Guzik rejects that, citing Kistemaker that the change is "only a stylistic change and nothing more," and saying the passage sets no date but "when that which is perfect has come." The KJV's three verbs ("fail … cease … vanish away") render the same two Greek words.

τὸ τέλειον

TO TELEION · "THE PERFECT" · G5046 · G3313

Ek merous, "out of a part," appears four times (vv. 9 twice, 10, 12; the NASB renders v. 10 "the partial"). Against it stands *to teleion*, the complete, the goal reached — the end toward which something is made (Henry: "When the end is once attained, the means will of course be abolished"). What the perfect is divides teachers: the completed New Testament (some cessationists), or the return of Christ and the eternal state (Guzik, and Henry's "perfect state above"). Verse 12 decides much: the perfect brings "face to face" and "I will know fully" — language the New Testament uses of seeing Christ (1 John 3:2). *Nēpios* (G3516), "child," is the word of 3:1, "infants in Christ."

ἐν αἰνίγματι

EN AINIGMATI · "DIMLY" · G135 · G2072 · G1921

Esoptron is a mirror of polished metal — Corinth was famous for its bronze ones — clear enough to use, never perfectly clear (its only other New Testament use is James 1:23). "Dimly" is *en ainigmati*, "in a riddle" (Henry), our word "enigma," found only here. It echoes Numbers 12:8, where God spoke with Moses "mouth to mouth … not in dark sayings" — the Greek Old Testament uses the same word. Then *epignōsomai*, the intensive "know fully," "just as I also have been fully known" (*epegnōsthēn*, aorist passive): God's knowledge of me is already complete; mine of Him is catching up.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik calls the gifts temporary "containers" of God's work; "love is the work itself." They are "imperfect gifts for an imperfect time." He rejects the view that "that which is perfect" is the completed New Testament, takes it as the presence of the Perfect One — Christ's return or our "graduation to the eternal" — and notes Calvin placed it at death. He argues against John MacArthur's reading of the middle-voice "will cease," and holds that the gifts continue until then. Corinth's bronze mirrors picture our dim sight now; "face to face" is unhindered fellowship, real where Exodus 33:11 and Numbers 12:8 were figurative. "When the sun rises, we turn off the lesser lights." What makes heaven heaven is the Lord Himself: to know as I am known will not make me omniscient, but I will know Him "as perfectly as I can."

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

Sproul's teaching series *Love* gives this section two lessons. Ligonier's description of lesson 13, "Never Fails," says he takes on the saying that all good things must come to an end — worldly wisdom he calls misinformed — and shows from Scripture that biblical love is eternal. Lesson 14, "Growing Up in Love," takes up verse 11: how a believer puts away childish things and yet remains a child. On the "then" of verse 12, in an *Ultimately* episode on the beatific vision (not a comment on this verse as such) he asks us to "imagine having an unmediated direct apprehension of the very being of God": the remnants of sin will be gone, "And we're going to be like Christ." (No transcript of the *Love* lessons was available, so only these descriptions are summarized.)

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

Spurgeon's sermon "Now, and Then" (No. 1002, 1871) on verse 12 longs aloud — "Oh, for clearer vision! Oh, for more perfect knowledge!" — and lists what we shall know then: ourselves, our sin and our standing in Christ; the church and who truly belongs to it; the dark providences that will prove to be mercies; the doctrines that puzzle us; and above all Christ, face to face. "Oh! how little we do know, but how much we shall know!" Yet he guards the edge: "We shall never be omniscient—we cannot be." His lessons: be patient with others in disputes, since we all see dimly; and do not fear dying — "The man that is afraid of dying ought to be afraid of living."

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry sets love's permanence against the gifts the Corinthians prized: love is "a permanent and perpetual grace, lasting as eternity," while the extraordinary gifts were given to edify the church "and that but for a time." Tongues will cease — "There will be but one language in heaven." Knowledge in the partial way will give place to more: "The light of a candle is perfectly obscured by the sun shining in its strength." The present state is childhood, the future manhood; then we shall despise our "childish folly, in priding ourselves in such things." Now we see "*en ainigmati*, in a riddle," then face to face (1 John 3:2; Psalm 36:9). "It is at best but twilight while we are in this world; there it will be perfect and eternal day."

IV
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 13:13

The Greatest of These

Faith, hope and love abide — and why love is greatest

> 13 *But now ✩ faith, hope, love, abide these three; but △ the greatest of these is love.*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 13:13

> *"Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy."*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 14:1

FIGURE · WHY LOVE IS ESSENTIAL

WHY LOVE IS ESSENTIAL · EIGHT REASONS FROM THE WHOLE BIBLE

1 · Love is what God is 1 John 4:8, 16 — never "God is faith"	**2 · The Law hangs on it** Matt 22:37–40; Rom 13:10
3 · It is how we were saved 1 John 4:10, 19; Rom 5:8	**4 · It is Christ's mark on us** John 13:34–35; Rev 2:4
5 · It is the only thing that builds 1 Cor 8:1; 14:1–5	**6 · It is the goal of all teaching** 1 Tim 1:5; Eph 3:19
7 · It is the Spirit's fruit Rom 5:5; Gal 5:22	**8 · It is the one thing that lasts** 1 Cor 13:8, 13; 1 John 3:2

Without it, every gift is nothing (vv1–3). When every gift is gone, it remains (v13).
Not useful, not admirable — essential.

Paul assumes in chapter 13 what the whole Bible argues: love is God's nature, the Law's summary, the gospel's shape, the church's mark, and the one thing that lasts.

νυνὶ δὲ μένει

NYNI DE MENEI · "BUT NOW … ABIDE" · G3306

Menō is to remain, stay, dwell — John's word for abiding in Christ (John 15:4–10). The verb is singular, gathering the three into one abiding: "faith, hope, love ... these three." *Nyni de* can be temporal ("now, in this age") or logical ("but as it is"); either way the contrast is with the gifts that will be done away (v. 8). The triad runs through Paul — "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope" (1 Thessalonians 1:3), "the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation" (5:8). *Pistis* (G4102) and *elpis* (G1680) are the creature's posture toward a God not yet seen.

μείζων

MEIZŌN · "GREATEST" · G3187

Meizōn is the comparative "greater," used as a superlative among three — the same word as "the greater gifts" in 12:31. Corinth asked which *gift* was greater; Paul answers that the greater thing is not a gift at all. Why love? Guzik and Henry: faith will become sight and hope fruition, but love goes on — and love is what God *is* (1 John 4:8, 16), while Scripture never says God is faith or God is hope. Henry: charity is "the end to which the other two are but means." Spurgeon reads it as the summit rather than the base — faith is the foundation; love the pinnacle.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik: "The three great pursuits of the Christian life are not 'miracles, power, and gifts'; they are faith, hope, and love." He asks what you really want more of, and traces the triad through 1 Thessalonians 1:3 and 5:8, Galatians 5:5–6, 1 Peter 1:21–22, Colossians 1:4–5 and 2 Timothy 1:12–13. Love is greatest first because it continues and even grows in the eternal state, when faith and hope have done their work — we will not need faith when we see God face to face — and second because love is an attribute of God (1 John 4:8), while God has neither faith nor hope as we do. We do not have to choose among the three, he adds; but without love as motive and goal, the gifts are distractions. "If you lose love, you lose everything."

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

In a short devotional, "Learning to Love," Sproul says the chapter's popularity shows how much Christians care about love — but "1 Corinthians 13 is a double-edged sword, however." "It shows us how unloving we are," because its measure is not our feelings but God: "The ultimate norm of love is God Himself." "His love is utterly perfect, containing no shadow that would obscure its brilliant purity." That is why love outranks every gift — it is the likeness of God in His people. His counsel is simple: "Prayerfully study 1 Corinthians 13," and let it expose and reshape you.

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

In his exposition of verse 13 Spurgeon will not let the greatest grace be confused with the first one: love "is the highest, the pinnacle. It is not the foundation — that is faith." He draws the picture from a rose: faith the most needful part, love the bloom and most beautiful. And he dissents from those who say "that faith and hope will not be found in heaven": Paul calls all three abiding things, so the saints will still trust and still look forward — to the resurrection and to Christ's appearing. Here Spurgeon differs from Guzik and Henry, who say faith and hope give way to sight and fruition; all three agree that love is greatest.

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry sums up: love is preferred "not only to gifts, but to other graces, to faith and hope." "Faith fixes on the divine revelation, and assents to that: hope fastens on future felicity, and waits for that"; but love "fastens on the divine perfections themselves." Charity is chief, "being the end to which the other two are but means." In heaven "we shall perfectly love God, because he will appear amiable for ever," and perfectly love one another "when none but saints are there." "When faith and hope are at an end, true charity will burn for ever with the brightest flame." It is "the surest offspring of God, and bears his fairest impression. For God is love."

V
THEME

CROSS-REFERENCES

The Passage in the Whole Bible

From the two great commandments to the face of Christ — why love is essential

> *"The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."*
>
> MATTHEW 22:39–40

> *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*
>
> JOHN 13:34–35

> *"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."*
>
> ROMANS 13:10

> *"namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation."*
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 5:19

> *"Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."*
>
> 1 PETER 4:8

> *"The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love."*
>
> 1 JOHN 4:8

> *"In this is love, not that we 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."*
>
> 1 JOHN 4:10–11

> *"Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is."*
>
> 1 JOHN 3:2

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik reads “bears all things” beside 1 Peter 4:8 — love covers a multitude of sins — and “face to face” beside 1 John 3:2: when we see Him as He is, “There will be no more barriers to our relationship with God.”

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry closes his chapter where John does: charity is “the surest offspring of God,” “For God is love, 1 John 4 8, 16” — and he hears John 13:34–35 behind verses 4–7, the new commandment by which all men should know Christ’s disciples.

SECTION II · STUDY HELPS

At a Glance

Four voices, one chapter

Four teachers, one chapter. Guzik walks the text and its practical tests; Sproul presses love as the chief virtue and God as its norm; Spurgeon preaches its labors and its heaven; Henry gathers it into Puritan counsel. They differ on two things — when the gifts end (Guzik: at Christ's coming; Henry: the extraordinary gifts were "but for a time") and whether faith and hope abide in heaven (Spurgeon yes; Guzik and Henry, they give way to sight) — and agree that nothing outranks love.

THE MOVEMENT	GUZIK · the text	SPROUL · the doctrine	SPURGEON · the heart	HENRY · the counsel
I · Without love	Not love versus gifts; love is the motive and goal of every gift.	Gifts and martyrdom can be done without love; hypocrisy was the sin Christ judged.	Judas had miracle-faith and was not saved; God requires the heart.	The charitable heart, not the voluble tongue; one dram of charity outweighs miracle-faith.
II · Fifteen verbs	Love in action words; put Jesus' name in, then your own.	Longsuffering love keeps no scorecard; kindness answers those who hurt us.	Love covers with a finger on her lip; believes good as long as it can.	Where the fire of love is kept in, the flames of wrath will not kindle.
III · Never fails	Gifts are containers, love the work; the perfect is Christ's presence.	Love is eternal, against the proverb that all good things end; we shall see God.	How little we know now, how much then — but never omniscient.	One language in heaven; the candle lost in the sun; now twilight, then day.
IV · The greatest	Faith, hope, love are the pursuits; love lasts and God is love.	A double-edged sword: the norm of love is God Himself.	Faith the foundation, love the pinnacle; all three abide in heaven.	Love is the end of faith and hope; it will burn for ever.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–13 · A COMPARATIVE READING

† Key Insights to Carry

- **This is a chapter for a church fight, not a wedding.** It stands between "earnestly desire the greater gifts" (12:31) and "Pursue love" (14:1) — Paul's answer to a church ranking itself by its gifts. THE TEXT
- **Love is subtracted, not compared.** Paul does not say gifts are worth less than love; he says gifts without love equal nothing — and the verdict falls on the person: "I am nothing." THE TEXT
- **Not love versus gifts.** "It isn't an issue of love versus the gifts." A church never has to choose; love is what the gifts are for. GUZIK
- **Agapē is a verb.** All fifteen descriptions in vv. 4–7 are verbs. Love of the will can be commanded — and obeyed — even when feelings lag. THE GREEK
- **Every refusal names a Corinthian sin.** Jealousy (3:3), boasting (4:7), arrogance (4:18; 5:2; 8:1), the drunken Supper (11:21), lawsuits (6:7) — the portrait of love is a mirror held up to the letter. THE TEXT
- **The ledger closes in both directions.** *Logizomai* — love does not take a wrong into account (13:5), because God in Christ is "not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor 5:19). THE GREEK
- **Longsuffering love does not keep a scorecard.** Sproul roots patience in God's own: "If not for the longsuffering of God, we would perish." SPROUL
- **Love stands with a finger on her lip.** Spurgeon: love covers the faults of brothers instead of publishing them, and "Love never despairs." SPURGEON

- **Gifts are for now; love is for ever.** Prophecy, tongues and knowledge are "in part" and will be done away; love never falls. Henry: "There will be but one language in heaven." HENRY
- **Love is greatest because God is love.** Scripture never says God is faith or God is hope. Faith becomes sight, hope becomes possession; love goes on, "the surest offspring of God." HENRY

† Questions for the Table

1 **Paul takes the gifts Corinth bragged about and subtracts love. What would I list in verses 1–3 if Paul wrote them about me — and what is left if love is missing?**

Not "my gift is diminished" but "I am nothing."

13:1-3; 12:31

2 **Read verses 4–7 with your own name in place of "love." Where is the first line you cannot honestly say?**

Guzik's test: first Jesus' name (every line fits), then mine (the work begins).

13:4-7

3 **Whose wrong am I still carrying on the books? What would it take to close that account this week?**

Logizomai — the same verb as God "not counting their trespasses."

13:5; 2 Cor 5:19

4 **Do I believe the best about the men at this table — or save best-case thinking for my own motives?**

Sproul: we reserve best-case analysis for ourselves; love extends it.

13:7; 1 Pet 4:8

5 **Everything I am proud of in ministry is "in part." What am I building that will still be standing face to face?**

Gifts are containers; love is the work itself.

13:8-12; 1 John 3:2

6 **Why is love greater than faith and hope — and what does that say about what our church should be known for?**

God is love; the world knows Christ's disciples by their love.

13:13; John 13:35; 1 John 4:8

Paul promised a more excellent way, and it turns out to have a face. Read verses 4–7 with Christ's name in place of "love" and every line is true; read them with your own and you find the work — and remember that every line was first done to you. The gifts will end, the mirror will become a face, and the love that was patient with Corinth and is patient with you will still be there when everything partial is done away.

Teaching the Word. Living in the Light. — Smith For Christ

† Sources

Each teacher's section summarizes the pages below in our own words; short quotations are verbatim from them. Matthew Henry died in 1714 having reached Acts; his *Commentary* on 1 Corinthians was completed after his death by Simon Browne from his notes

and method, and is cited under his name as it is published. Henry's Commentary and C.H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) are in the public domain; Guzik and Sproul are summarized — consult each author's own work.

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