

1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13 “Spiritual Gifts – Love, the More Excellent Way” Aug 24, 2014
Numbers 12
Psalm 102

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul will speak of how we now see in a mirror dimly,
but then we will see face-to-face.

The root of that image is found in Numbers 12,
where God says that he ordinarily reveals himself to prophets in dreams and visions,
but with Moses, “I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles,
and he beholds the form of the LORD.” (12:8)

Moses alone, of all the people of the OT, saw the LORD on Mt. Sinai in all his glory.
And yet Moses only saw God’s back.
God spoke with him “mouth to mouth” –
but Moses did not see God’s face.

Paul says that because of what Jesus has done –
because Jesus has been the faithful *Son* – not just a faithful servant –
therefore we *will see face-to-face*.

Psalm 102 longs for that day.

In Psalm 102, we cry out with longing for the day when we will see him as he is!

Sing Psalm 102

Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13

Introduction: Faith, Hope, and Love

Have you ever noticed how often faith, hope, and love go together?

In Colossians 1:4, Paul says that he thanks God,
“since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus
and of the love that you have for all the saints,
because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.”

We used Romans 5:1-5 as our declaration of pardon –
a passage that starts with how we have been justified by faith (v1),
and how we *rejoice in hope* of the glory of God (v2),
because God’s *love* has been poured into our hearts through the HS (v5).

And that’s just a start!

I use those two because in Romans 5, Paul emphasizes *faith* –
highlighting the fact that *faith* is the starting point.
Without faith, you’ll never around to hope and love!

And in Colossians 1, *hope* is the key – the “hope laid up for you in heaven”
“the hope of the gospel that you heard” (1:23)
which is the energizing power behind our faith!

After all, without hope (without something that you are looking forward to)
you'll never persevere in faith and love.

But of course, in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul insists that the greatest of these is *love* –
because there will come a day when faith will become sight –
and our hope will be seen with our very eyes
(and who hopes for what he already has!).

Love cannot get you into the kingdom (only faith can do that!).
Love cannot energize you to persevere (only hope can do that!).
But love is the greatest of these three –
because love never ends.

At the end of chapter 12, Paul sets up his discussion of love:

1. The Body, Its Members, and the Gifts (12:27-31)

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

Corporately, together, you are the body.
Individually, you are members of the body.

And God has appointed.

It's important that when Paul talks about the church,
he emphasizes the fact that *every* gift is appointed by God.
It's not just that God appoints the leaders,
and everyone else just figures out what to do.

Rather, God appoints all the gifts in the church.
Your gifts are given and appointed by God – just as much as I am!

The first three in Paul's list are "gifts who are men"
"first apostles, second prophets, third teachers" –
while the rest are more circumstantial gifts –
miracles, gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

Paul does this in Ephesians 4 as well, talking about how Christ has given gifts to his church –
and among those gifts are certain *people* with a particular calling.

The nouns that Paul uses makes it clear that the apostles, prophets, and teachers are people,
while the other gifts are things.

(For instance, Paul will sometimes talk about the gift of "prophecy" (a thing),
but here he speaks of the gift of the "prophet" (a man).

At the top of the list are the “big three” –
apostles, prophets, and teachers.

An apostle is one who is *sent* by another.

While the term seems to have been used more broadly than just the 12 apostles,
there seems to have been agreement that to be an apostle,
you had to have *seen the Lord Jesus* – and been *commissioned by him*.

So there’s no such thing as a continuing apostolate.

The apostles are first in the church –
not just so long as they live, but *permanently*.

It’s just as true today as it was in the first century that God has appointed *first apostles*.

The apostles’ teaching is the canon – the standard – by which the church lives.

So there are no *new* apostles – but that’s simply because we already *have* apostles.

Second – prophets.

Prophets are not fortune tellers.

It’s helpful to think about prophets and teachers in conjunction:

Prophets announce, proclaim, challenge, and comfort.

Teachers instruct, interpret, expound and apply.

The teacher expounds and explains “what is the case about God’s dealings with the world
through Christ by the Spirit” (AT 1017).

The work of the prophet is based on the work of the teacher (and especially the apostles).

If you think about the prophets in the OT,

most of the prophets were *not* inspired to write Scripture.

The task of a prophet was to declare the will of God for our salvation.

Think of how the Shorter Catechism says,

“Christ executes the office of a prophet in revealing to us, by his Word and Spirit,
the will of God for our salvation.”

That’s what a prophet does.

In the NT, there are a lot of different words used to describe this:

prophet, teacher, preacher, pastor, evangelist, minister, etc.

In Antioch, in Acts 13:1, there were “prophets and teachers”

who led the church in Antioch –

and who commissioned Paul and Barnabas to go on their first missionary journey.

As Paul and Barnabas conclude their journey,

they appointed “elders in every church.”

Acts 15:2 says that in Jerusalem, there were “apostles and elders.”

Not every church had apostles!

Indeed, the church in Jerusalem is the “mother church” for the rest of the world!

Antioch does not have apostles –
so their “prophets and teachers” appear to be the “preaching elders” in that city.

Now, in Antioch, Jerusalem, and Corinth,
there were many hundreds (if not thousands) of Christians –
spread out into many “house-churches”
that might have anywhere from 50-100 believers.

When we talk about “the church in Corinth” we are not talking about a single congregation.
So it’s not surprising that there would be many prophets and teachers –
since there are many different places where the church gathers.

Some people think that prophets all received “special revelation” from God,
and so therefore, they say that prophecy has ceased –
since we no longer need special revelation.

Now, I agree that “special revelation” has ceased.
Christ has revealed through his Word and Spirit the will of God for our salvation.
The Scriptures are the only infallible rule of faith and life.

But it is not clear to me that all prophets received special revelation!
There seem to be all sorts of prophets (both in the OT and the NT)
who encourage, exhort, and declare –
in very much the same sort of way that preachers do today!
And that seems to be what Paul is talking about here.

Here’s what I think is happening:
Vocabulary was flexible.
People used various words to describe different offices and functions.
The terminology that Paul uses with the Corinthians
seems to be different from the words he uses with the Philippians
(where he refers only to bishops and deacons).
That doesn’t mean that the two churches had radically different church orders.
It just means that they used different words to describe it.

This doesn’t mean that we need to start calling our pastors “prophets” –
just like you don’t need to call your pastors “bishop”
(even though that’s used more often than “pastor” in the NT)!
Rather, what it means is that we need to recognize that “prophets” in the NT church
are *not* some exotic creature.
The fact that one or two of them make predictions in the NT
does not mean that prophets are supposed to go around making predictions!
Prophets are supposed to encourage, exhort and declare!
The view I’ve just outline is the old Reformed view held by William Perkins,
who wrote “the Art of Propheying” – which was his treatise on preaching.

Much of what he said is summarize in our Larger Catechism, which asks:

Q. 159. How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?

A. They that are called to labour in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season;
plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom,
but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power;
faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God;
wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers;
zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people;
sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

In other words, we believe that the pastoral office includes *both* the aspect of the prophet and the teacher.

But I don’t want to ignore the other gifts:

“helping” – Thiselton points out that the word “helping” is used in secular Greek to refer to “administrative support” (basically, people who are good at getting things done!)
“administrating” – which refers to “leadership” –
cuberneseis is used of a “steersman” or “pilot” and so might be better translated “the ability to formulate strategy”
Perhaps in the modern world “administrating” has come to be too mundane.
The “cuberneseis” is someone who steers or directs the ship in a wise course.

The church needs people who are good at getting things done – and people who are good at steering/leading in the right direction.

We had an excellent discussion at the leadership retreat yesterday.

We had fifteen people sitting around the table, talking about both “strategy” and “getting things done.”
You don’t want prophets and teachers running everything!
The church needs people who are good at formulating strategy (administrating) and people who are good at “getting things done” (helping).

In verses 29-30, Paul asks a series of questions – which in Greek demand a negative answer:

²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

Given what Paul has already told us about the variety of gifts that come from the one Spirit, this should not be surprising!

We should not expect everyone to have the same gift!

Paul told us last time that God has arranged the members in the body,
gifting each one as he chose.

Likewise, the body is interrelated – interdependent –
and so we need each other – and each other’s gifts.

³¹ *But earnestly desire the higher gifts.*

What does Paul mean by the “higher” or “greater” gifts?

Apostle?

Prophet?

Teacher?

You might think that – but only until you read the rest of the verse:

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

In other words, *yes*, by all means, earnestly desire the greater gifts!

But *what are* the greater gifts?

You will only know that if you *get* 1 Corinthians 13!

Because gifts without love equals a big fat zero.

2. Gifts Without Love = a Big Fat Zero (13:1-3)

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

Paul makes it clear in verse 1, that speaking in tongues means *speaking in a known language*.

Most of what passes for tongues nowadays is neither human nor angelic language.

It’s simply spontaneous vocalization.

I was trained how to do that as a jazz singer –

It’s called “scatting.”

It’s fun – it’s cathartic –

but it’s not a gift given by the Holy Spirit.

When the people on the day of Pentecost spoke in tongues,

all the people around them heard them speaking in known languages.

It wasn’t just spontaneous vocalization.

But Paul says that if I speak various languages – but have not love –

I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

I’m just an annoying noise!

² *And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,*

“propheteia” in Greek thought was the gift of interpreting the will of the gods;
it’s ordinarily translated “prophecy” in the NT.

So if I have “prophecy” (if I have the ability to declare the will of God) –
and if I understand all mysteries and all knowledge –
in other words, if I have the abilities of both a prophet and a teacher –

and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
the “gift of faith” (as we saw two weeks ago) is a special gift not given to all Christians;
this is, as Paul puts it, a faith that moves mountains!

In other words, if I am the one who has *all the gifts!*
tongues, prophecy, teaching, faith....

but have not love, I am nothing.

How often have you seen it?
Someone who has it all!
But they don’t *love*.

If you have all the gifts – but have not love – then you are nothing.

Without love, the gifts are worthless.

Think about what Jesus said:

“deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.”
or what he said to the rich young ruler,
“sell all that you have, give to the poor, and follow me.”

Well, Paul says:

³ *If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned,^[a] but have not love, I gain nothing.*

In other words, you could *outwardly* obey Jesus’ commandments,
but if you don’t have love, you gain nothing.

Think about this.

Paul says that if you follow the way of the cross without love –
it’s *not really the way of the cross!*

Anyone can be a martyr!
All you have to do is *die for a cause* – and woo-hoo! You’re a martyr!
But the way of the cross is also *the way of love*.

Okay, by now we are convinced that we need to have *love*.

But what is love?

And it looks like Paul answers our question in verses 4-7.

After all, Paul says, “Love is...”

But quite frankly, Paul does not answer the question ‘what *is* love?’ in these verses. Rather, he tells us “what does love look like?”

3. What Does Love Look Like? (13:4-7)

⁴ *Love is patient and kind;*

love does not envy or boast;

it is not arrogant⁵ or rude.

It does not insist on its own way;

it is not irritable or resentful;^[b]

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.*

In verses 4-7 Paul thoroughly retraces the whole of 1 Corinthians!

Think about it:

⁴ *Love is patient and kind;*

When you come to the Lord’s Table, wait for one another!

love does not envy or boast;

“there is jealousy and strife among you” (3:3)

“why do you boast?” (4:7)

it is not arrogant⁵ or rude.

“I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power” (4:19)

(the word arrogant is only used 7 times in the NT – 6 times in 1 Cor!)

The word “rude” is also used only in 1 Cor – also in 7:36

“if anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed”

It does not insist on its own way;

“why not rather be defrauded?” (6:8)

it is not irritable or resentful;^[b]

“when one of you has a grievance against another...” (6:1)

⁶ *it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.*

“a man has his father’s wife – and you are arrogant!...Your boasting is not good (5:2, 6)

⁷ *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

“we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.”

So Paul weaves together the themes of his epistle into this beautiful description of love.

The ESV (like most other translations) uses a lot of helping verbs:

“Love is...”

As a result we often think of verses 4-7 as a description of what love *is*.

But in Greek, many of these are active verbs.

So, maybe we should translate it:

“Love waits patiently; love shows kindness.” (AT 1026)

My father has many times retold the story of how he failed to love my mother –
and he has asked me to retell the story,

hoping that someone else will learn before it’s too late!

He thought that love was passive.

“Love is patient. Love is kind”

Everyone knew that my father was a very patient, very kind man.

But his patience and kindness were *passive*.

He knew that something was bothering my mom –

but he figured that if it was important to her, she’d say something.

He could be patient!

But that’s not *love*.

Patience does not mean passively sitting there and “putting up” with someone.

This *verb* is an active verb.

The word has the idea of suffering for a long time.

(The older translations said “suffereth long”)

Love forbears – love suffers long.

If you want to know what love looks like –
look at the cross of Jesus.

Jesus did not passively “put up with us.”

He actively endured suffering for us.

I often say “marriage is martyrdom” –

but how often do I actually deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus?

And likewise, “kindness” is not a passive quality,

but an *action* of love:

“Love shows kindness.”

Apparently this is the first written example of the Greek verb, “to kind.”

We don’t have one in English either!

The idea here is that *love – true love –*

reaches out to the other with open arms –

and *not* in a selfish way!

Love welcomes the other generously.

Origen comments on this verse that love “shows sweetness to all persons.” (AT 1048)

In one sense, “waiting patiently” and “showing kindness” cover the whole ground.

But Paul wants us to see more clearly what he has in mind:

love does not burn with envy – love does not brag

envy and boasting both have to do

with how we see ourselves in relation to others:

If we envy, we wish that we had what they have!

If we boast, we brag that we have what they don’t have!

Love just doesn’t think that way about others!

And you could summarize that by saying that love is not *arrogant*.

Now, the problem is that *no one* ever thinks, “I am arrogant.”

The word means to be “puffed up.”

The idea is that love is not inflated with its own importance.

If I have some grandiose scheme based on an inflated sense of my own importance,
then I will simply use you for my own ends.

So long as you are concerned with yourself and what *you* get out of the relationship,
you are not loving the other person!

Love is not ill-tempered or bad-mannered.

Love does not insist on its own way.

Paul is directly challenging the ideas about love in his own culture.

The Greek god Eros (called Cupid by the Romans)

is cunning and crafty as he “seeks his own interests” –

but Christian love seeks the interests of others.

Perhaps there is a reason why the sexual relationship is described in the Bible

by the euphemism “knowing” –

as “Adam *knew* his wife.”

When you *know* something, you have mastered that object.

In the same way, in the sexual relationship, you *possess* one another.

Erotic love seeks to possess and control.

But Paul is talking about a different kind of *love* -

he even uses a different word (agape).

Sometimes I think that Paul is speaking directly to modern church culture!

Too often we think that ‘the world revolves around me’!

Think about the way we talk and think:

why do you love your wife? (because when I'm with her, everything is good)

why do you love your husband? (because he makes me laugh)

why do you love your friends? (because I found a place where I belong)

why do you love your church? (because I get spiritually fed)

Now, *none of those things are bad.*

I'm glad that life is good when you are with your wife.

I'm glad that your husband makes you laugh.

It's a good thing to have friends who make you feel you belong.

And you should be spiritually fed by your church!

But all of those ways of talking are oriented around the self.

It's about *my* interests, *my* happiness, *my* situation in life.

It's a sort of love – but it's an inferior love – an “erotic love”

(not erotic in the sense of “sexual” – but erotic in the sense of a self-oriented love).

Paul is talking about a love that is rooted in the incarnation and cross of Jesus –
a love that does not put myself at the center of my world.

After all, why do I get irritable towards my wife and children?

If I love them with an “eros” sort of love – a love that is all about *me* –

then I will get irritable when they disrupt my cozy self-oriented life.

If I love them for what they do for me,

then when they *fail* to do what I want,

I will be resentful.

Please note – I'm not saying that it's *not love!*

I'm saying that it's an *inferior* sort of love.

Love – *agape* – the sort of love that God showed us –
is *not* irritable – it does not get exasperated.

I appreciate how Paul says this – because he avoids the word “angry.”

We don't like to admit that we get angry.

We just get “frustrated” “irritated” “exasperated.”

And so Paul condescends to our tendency to beat around the bush
and says that love does not get exasperated.

After all, if love waits patiently –

and if love does not insist on its own way –

then if get exasperated,

it's because you don't love!

You may have wondered

“what about *love keeps no record of wrongs?*”

Notice the ESV footnote after “resentful.”

The point here is that love does not keep track of the faults of others.

That’s very much what resentment is!

A resentful person keeps track of wrongs – and holds them against others.

I like the older language, though.

Love keeps no record of wrongs.

(It highlights the *active* voice here).

Of course, there’s a danger in the older language.

If you simply say, “Love keeps no record of wrongs,”

you might conclude that love can never confront.

After all, if you don’t keep a record, then you’ll just be run over!

And that’s why the ESV switched to “resentful.”

Resentful *does* capture the attitude –

the problem is that the Greek is talking about an action!

And verse 6 helps us understand how it fits together:

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing –

but rejoices with the truth.

The prepositions are important.

Love does not rejoice *at* wrongdoing,

but rejoices *with* the truth.

They are not exactly parallel.

Eros – the self-centered sort of love – can rejoice *at* the truth.

But for a self-centered love, the truth is something to be mastered –

to be used – to be *mine*.

As we’ve seen over and over again in 1 Corinthians,

‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ have been used as weapons in Corinth.

The ‘strong’ use their ‘knowledge’ and connections to overpower the weak.

But love – genuine love – rejoices *with* the truth.

The truth is not *mine* to be used and manipulated and controlled.

Anthony Thiselton says it well:

“Genuine love...alone decenters the power ‘interests’ of the self and of its peer group,
and in recentering them in the Other

(primarily in God, but also in the other person)

disengages from self-interest.

Only now can truth emerge as disengaged from a power agenda.

Love, Paul says, has discovered integrity.” (AT 1055)

Love *joyfully celebrates* truth.

Love “takes no pleasure in someone else’s failure...

If the situation is bad, love wants to help;

if the situation is good, love wants to celebrate” (AT 1056).

Verse 7 is perhaps one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible.

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Karl Marx used this idea to describe Christianity as the “opium of the people”

and Friedrich Nietzsche said that Paul’s view of the cross and love

“has sided with everything weak, low, and botched.”

Freud said that “love believes all things” was simply a projection

derived from inner conflicts resolved by wishful thinking! (cited in AT 1057)

What does Paul mean?

Does he really mean that you believe everything? (Of course not!)

Does he really mean that you endure anything?

(Paul himself got out of a beating once by pleading that he was a Roman citizen –

did Paul not have love?)

Perhaps we could paraphrase Paul by saying that Love never gives up –

never loses faith, never gives up hope, never runs out of energy.

Obviously, Paul believes that there are times when the Christian has to say, ‘NO!’

He’s done it several times earlier in this epistle!

But love never gives up!

Just as God loves you – and never gives up on you –

that’s the sort of love that we should have for others.

Love centers on the other –

not because of what *we get* from them,

but because *love never ends*.

But this sermon must end –

and so I won’t try to finish the chapter today!

But let us pray that God will give us this love!

Lord, you have taught us that all our doings without love are worth nothing:

send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love,

the true bond of peace and of all virtues,

without which whoever lives is counted dead before you.

Grant this for your only Son Jesus Christ’s sake, who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. (Cranmer)