

THE MOST EXCELLENT QUALITY OF LIFE: LOVE, NOT GIFTS

1 CORINTHIANS 13:01–13

Introduction

There is no question, what the world needs more than anything else is love. If people loved each other, really loved each other, there would be no more war, crime, abuse, injustice, poverty, hunger, starvation, homelessness, deprivation or immorality. Love is the one ingredient that could revolutionize society. Love is the greatest quality of human life. Love is the supreme quality, the most excellent way for a man to live.

- I. The great importance of love (vv. 1-3).
- II. The great acts of love (vv. 4-7).
- III. The great permanence of love (vv. 8-12).
- IV. The great supremacy of love (v. 13).

1 CORINTHIANS 13:01–13 LOVE

Throughout this passage, the word used for love or charity is the great word *agape*. (See *Love*, Jn. 21:15-17.) The meaning of *agape love* is more clearly seen by contrasting it with the various kinds of love. There are essentially four kinds of love. Whereas the English language has only the word *love* to describe all the affectionate experiences of men, the Greek language had a different word to describe each kind of love.

1. There is *passionate love* or *eros love*. This is the physical love between sexes; the patriotic love of a person for his nation; the ambition of a person for power, wealth or fame. Briefly stated, *eros love* is the base love of a man that arises from his own inner passion. Sometimes *eros love* is focused upon good and other times it is focused upon bad. It should be noted that *eros love* is never used in the New Testament.
2. There is *affectionate love* or *storge love*. This is the kind of love that exists between parent and child and between loyal citizens and a trustworthy ruler. *Storge love* is also not used in the New Testament.
3. There is an *endearing love*, the love that cherishes. This is *phileo love*, the love of a husband and wife for each other, of a brother for a brother, of a friend for the dearest of friends. It is the love that cherishes, that holds someone or something ever so dear to one's heart.
4. There is *selfless and sacrificial love* or *agape love*. Agape love is the love of the mind, of the reason, of the will. It is the love that goes so far...
 - that it loves a person even if he does not deserve to be loved.

- that it actually loves the person who is utterly unworthy of being loved.

Note four significant points about agape love.

- a. Selfless or agape love is the love of God, the very love possessed by God Himself. It is the love demonstrated in the cross of Christ.

=> It is the love of God for the *ungodly*.

Rom 5:6 *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.*

=> It is the love of God for *unworthy sinners*.

Rom 5:8 *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

=> It is the love of God for *undeserving enemies*.

Rom 5:10 *For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

- b. Selfless or agape love is a gift of God. It can be experienced only if a person knows God *personally* — only if a person has received the love of God into his heart and life. Agape love has to be shed abroad (poured out, flooded, spread about) by the Spirit of God within the heart of a person.

Rom 5:5 *And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

- c. Selfless or agape love is the greatest thing in all of life according to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mark 12:29-31 *"The most important one [commandment]," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*

- d. Selfless or agape love is the greatest possession and gift in human life according to the Scripture (1 Cor.13:1-13).

1 Cor 13:13 *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. □*

I. 1 Corinthians 13:01–03 Importance of Love

The great importance of love. Unequivocally, the decree is pronounced; the judgment is given; the verdict is declared:

=> the superior quality of life is love; it is not gifts.

=> the most excellent way to live and serve is to possess and share love; it is not gifts.

The contrast between love and gifts is vivid. Three *verdicts* are declared and the verdicts stress with resounding force the great superiority of love.

1. Verdict one: tongues without love are meaningless.

=> The “tongues of men” probably means all the languages of men (cp. Acts 2:4-13).

=> The “tongues of men” probably means the heavenly language or the spiritual gift of an ecstatic utterance given by the Holy Spirit of God.

=> “A resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” do not mean the sound of musical instruments but the clanging together of either small cymbals or the clashing and banging together of large cymbals by untrained persons.

A person can possess the gift and ability to speak and share Christ in all the languages of the world, but if he does not have love, *he becomes* only a clanging and tinkling noise. His speech is meaningless.

A person can possess the spiritual gift of tongues, that is, speak in the heavenly languages of angels; but if he does not have love, he *becomes* only a clanging and tinkling noise. His heavenly, angelic language is meaningless.

Note the phrase “I am only.” This is a crucial point: the gifted person’s speech is not only meaningless, the person himself *becomes meaningless*. He becomes useless in his life and ministry for Christ. Love is far more superior than the gift of tongues.

2. Verdict two: gifts without love are nothing. Three particular gifts are contrasted with love.

a. There is the gift of prophecy (see *Prophecy*, 1 Cor. 12:8-10). A person may have the gift of speaking under the inspiration of God’s Spirit, both predicting the future and proclaiming the truth of God’s Word. He may possess all the charisma, stature, eloquence and descriptive language in the world; but if he does not have love, he is nothing. Not only is his gift of prophecy nothing, but he is nothing.

Thought 1. There is always the danger of feeling and acting superior because of one’s prophetic gifts and eloquence. It is possible to long for souls and to preach the glories of heaven and the tragedy of hell with an attitude and a tone that one is better than others.

b. There is the gift of understanding “all mysteries and all knowledge” — the sum total of all that God has ever revealed and of all that man has ever learned, discovered and developed. Just imagine! A person possessing all the knowledge in the world! Yet if he does not have love, he would be nothing! Not only would his understanding and knowledge be nothing, he would be nothing.

Thought 1. The danger is looking down upon others, of feeling that one is more knowledgeable or better equipped than others. A coolness or detachment or aloofness often characterizes such a person.

- c. There is the gift of faith, that is, the very special gift of faith that is given by the Holy Spirit to remove mountains and to do great and miraculous things for God (see *Faith*, 1 Cor. 12:8-10). Note the word “*all*”. Imagine a person possessing “all faith”; yet, if he did not possess love, he *would be nothing*.

Thought 1. The danger is spiritual superiority, an overblown sense of importance. A person with the gift of faith can easily hurt others by speaking openly of their *great faith*. They can easily make others feel inferior and of less importance to God.

3. Verdict three: giving without love profits nothing. Two phenomenal illustrations are given.
- a. There is the illustration of selling and giving everything that a person has. Imagine giving everything — “giving all I possess to the poor” — yet, if I have not love, it profits me nothing.

Thought 1. There are several dangers in giving. There are the dangers of:

=> giving out of duty.

=> giving with contempt because one is forced to give.

=> giving with an air of superiority because one has and the needy do not have.

=> giving with a rebuke because one feels the needy are just irresponsible and ought to make their own way in life, giving unsacrificially.

- b. There is the illustration of martyrdom, the most terrible martyrdom of all — of being burned alive at the stake. Yet, if a person does not have love, his martyrdom profits him nothing. He dies in vain.

Thought 1. There is always the danger of counting martyrdom as a thing of glory and of pride, as something to show one’s commitment to a cause. If a believer is ever called upon to die as a martyr, he is to die only out of love for Christ and for his fellow man.

II. 1 Corinthians 13:04–07 *Great Acts of Love*

The great acts of love. What is given in these four verses is not a long, dry, methodical definition of love. On the contrary, the very acts of love are given — the very behaviour of a person, the very way a person is to live among and with others. In living and moving among others in the world, a person is to love, and this is what loving others means.

1. Love “is patient” (makrothumei): suffers long with people. The word always refers to being patient with people, not with circumstances.

Love is patient and suffers a long, long time...

- no matter the evil and injury done by a person.
- no matter the neglect or ignoring by a loved one.

Love is patient and suffers a long, long time without resentment, anger or seeking revenge. Love controls itself in order to win the person and to help him to live, work, and serve as he should.

Gal 5:22 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.*

Col 1:11 *Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully.*

2 Tim 4:2 *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction.*

2. Love is kind (chresteuetai): courteous, good, helpful, useful, giving, showing and showering favours. Love does not resent evil; it does not revel in the hurt and neglect. Love reaches out in kindness: in helpfulness, in giving and in showering favours upon the person who neglects or hurts oneself.

Rom 12:10 *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves.*

Eph 4:32 *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

3. Love does not envy (zeloï): is not jealous; does not have feelings against others because of what they have, such as gifts, position, friends, recognition, possessions, popularity, abilities. Love does not begrudge or attack or downplay the abilities and success of others. Love shares and joys and rejoices in the experience and good of others.

Gal 5:26 *Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

Psa 37:1 *Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong.*

Prov 3:31 *Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways.*

Prov 14:30 *A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.*

Prov 23:17 *Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord.*

4. Love does not boast (peopereuetai): does not brag nor seek recognition, honour or applause from others. On the contrary, love seeks to give: to recognize, to honour, to applaud the other person.

Rom 12:3 *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

Rom 12:10 *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves.*

Phil 2:3 *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.*

5. Love is not proud (phusioutai): puffed up, arrogant, conceited; does not think nor act as though oneself is better or above others. Love is modest and humble and recognizes and honours others.

Mat 18:4 “Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Luke 14:10 “But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honoured in the presence of all your fellow guests.”

Luke 22:26 “But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.”

1 Pet 5:5 Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

6. Love is not rude (aschemonei): unbecomingly, indecently, unmannerly, disgracefully. Love does nothing to shame oneself. Love is orderly and controlled; and it behaves and treats all persons with respect, honouring and respecting who they are.

Phil 1:10 So that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.

2 Th 3:7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you.

7. Love is not self-seeking: is not selfish; does not insist upon its own rights (Williams). Love is not focused upon who one is nor upon what one has done. Love seeks to serve, not have others serving oneself. Love is acknowledging others, not insisting that others acknowledge oneself; it is giving to others, not insisting that others give to oneself.

1 Cor 10:24 Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

Phil 2:4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

8. Love is not easily angered (paroxunetai): not ready to take offense; not quick tempered; not “touchy” (Phillips, as quoted by Leon Morris). It is not easily aroused to anger; does not become “exasperated” (Barclay). Love controls the emotions, and never becomes angry without a cause (Rom. 12:18).

Col 3:8 But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips.

James 1:19 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Psa 37:8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret — it leads only to evil.

Prov 16:32 *Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.*

Prov 19:11 *A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.*

Eccl 7:9 *Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.*

9. Love keeps no record of wrongs (logizetai to kakon): does not think evil; does not consider the wrong suffered; is not resentful; does not hold the evil done to oneself. Love suffers the evil done to it and forgets it.

Mat 5:39 *“But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”*

Rom 12:17 *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.*

1 Th 5:15 *Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.*

1 Pet 3:9 *Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.*

10. Love does not delight in evil (adikia): unrighteousness, evil, wrong-doing. Love does not take pleasure in the unrighteousness and sin of others; it does not feed upon sin and wrong, nor does it pass along the stories of sin and wrong. Man's nature is too often fed the tragedy of evil, whether personal sin or natural disaster (cp. the daily news reports and most subjects of conversation between so many people).

Mat 7:3 *“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”*

Rom 15:1 *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*

Gal 6:1 *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*

1 Pet 4:8 *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*

11. Love rejoices with the truth (Aletheia): rejoices when the truth is known and when it prevails; rejoices when others are recognized and promoted for whom they are and for what they have contributed. Love rejoices when the truth is rooted and grounded in a person and among the people of the world. Note that love never covers nor hides the truth; love is courageous in that it faces the truth.

Eph 4:25 *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body.*

Eph 6:14 *Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place.*

Zee 8:16 *These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other; and render true and sound judgment in your courts.*

Mal 2:6 *True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.*

12. Love protects and bears all things: the word protects or bears (stegei) means both to cover all things and to bear up under all things. Love does both: it stands up under the weight and onslaught of all things and it covers up the faults of others. It has no pleasure in exposing the wrong and weaknesses of others. Love bears up under any neglect, abuse, ridicule — anything that is thrown against it.

Eph 4:2-3 *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

Eph 6:9 *And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.*

Col 3:13 *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

13. Love always trusts: is “completely trusting” (Barclay); “always eager to believe the best” (Moffatt, as quoted by Leon Morris); is “ever ready to believe the best” (Amplified New Testament). Love sees and understands the circumstances and accepts and forgives and believes the very best about a person.

Luke 17:4 *“If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”*

Eph 4:32 *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Col 3:13 *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

14. Love always hopes: it “never ceases to hope” (Barclay); it expects the good to eventually triumph and to gain the victory; it refuses to accept failure; it always hopes for the best and for the ultimate triumph of the good — no matter how fallen or how tragic the fall or how difficult gaining the victory may seem.

Rom 8:24 *For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?*

Rom 15:4 *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

2 Th 2:16-17 *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*

1 John 3:3 *Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.*

15. Love always perseveres: the word perseveres (huopmenei) is a military word meaning to stand against the attack of an enemy. Love actively fights and endures all attacks. Love is strong, full of fortitude and fight, and it struggles against any and every assault to buckle in to being unloving. Love conquers and triumphs — always — because it endures all things. No matter what attacks love, named or unnamed, it endures the attack and continues to love.

Mat 10:22 *“All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”*

1 Cor 15:58 *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

Gal 6:9 *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*

James 1:12 *Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*

James 5:11 *As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*

Rev 3:11 *I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*

III. **1 Corinthians 13:08–12** *Permanence of Love*

The great permanence of love. Love is far superior to the spiritual gifts. The great permanence of love clearly shows its superiority.

1. Love never fails, never ceases and never vanishes. Love endures and lasts forever. But not so with spiritual gifts: the spiritual gifts shall cease to be and shall vanish. When? When we stand in eternity before God. Spiritual gifts are only temporary; they are not permanent; therefore, they are far inferior to love. Spiritual gifts are only temporary tools for us to use in reaching and ministering to a lost and needy world.

Thought 1. Note how believers become guilty of the very things they accuse the world of doing: focusing upon the temporary instead of the eternal. Too many believers glory in their earthly gifts and abilities instead of serving and ministering in love.

2. Love is perfect and complete. We know nothing perfectly, and we can proclaim and predict the truth only with partial certainty. No person knows all the truth. However, a day of perfection is coming, and when it comes, only that which is perfect will stand and endure.

The point is this: love is perfect; therefore, love shall endure and be the primary trait between believers in eternity. Therefore, love is far superior to the gifts.

3. Love is mature — maturity of behaviour. While on earth, all that man is and possesses — his abilities, knowledge, and being — all are as a child. Man is just immature and imperfect, no matter what area of his life is being considered. However, the day of maturity is coming, the day when he shall set aside all the childhood understanding and thoughts and become a mature man, a perfected man. When will that day come? It will come when love is perfected between God and man and between man and man. Love is the great gift and quality existing upon earth today that shall endure throughout eternity; therefore, love is far superior to the gifts and abilities of men.
4. Love is being face to face with God — a perfect consciousness and knowledge of God. Our present relationship with the Lord is comparable to the reflection we see through a dark mirror. We can faintly see the figure, but it is not fully distinct nor clear. Therefore, we only see God and the truth in part and we only know God and the truth in part. However, the day is coming when we shall know God even as He knows us — perfectly.

=> When is that day coming? The day love is perfected between God and man.

=> What will bring the day about? Love — God's perfect love for man.

It is love that will be perfected and that will bring the day of perfection to reality for man. It is love that will bring us into a face to face relationship with God and into a perfect knowledge of truth. Therefore, love is far superior to the spiritual gifts.

IV. 1 Corinthians 13:13 *Supremacy of Love*

The great supremacy of love. Both faith and hope are great qualities and gifts, but love is far superior. How? Remember that Paul is contrasting love with the spiritual gifts and dealing with the tendency of people to centre attention upon their gifts and accomplishments. Love is far superior to faith and hope for at least six reasons.

1. Faith focuses upon the revelation of God, whereas love focuses upon *God Himself*. We know about God only by the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, the Word, nature, and the inner witness of thoughts and conscience (cp. Rom. 1:18-20; 2:14-15). A man believes in God by focusing upon one or more of the revelations about God. But love is different, entirely different. Love focuses and centres upon God Himself and stirs a relationship of adoration and worship. Faith, of course, can stir the same adoration and worship; but faith can also exist without adoration and worship. A person can believe in someone and not love him.
2. Hope focuses upon being eternally with God in a perfect world, but again, love is superior because it focuses upon God Himself. A person can have hope in someone without loving him, but a person who loves someone always hopes in him.

3. Love — true love (agape love) — does not originate in the nature of man, but in the nature of God. God is love; love is the basic trait of His nature. The very existence of man is due to the fact that God is love, not to the fact that God believed or held hope for man. Therefore love, which is the basic trait of God's nature, is far superior to faith and hope.
4. True love is a gift of God. A man can know true love only as he comes to know the love of God. Faith arises from the heart of man, but love is deposited or given to man by God. It is shed abroad in the heart by God. Apart from God, man loves only those who love him; he either opposes or withdraws from those who hate him. A man can only love (agape love) his enemies through the love of God. Therefore love, being the very special gift of God, is far superior to faith and hope.
5. Experience and nature itself prove that faith and hope reach and grow people, but love reaches and grows people far more than any other gift or quality.
6. A person can believe in God, yet feel he is above others. He can act prideful, arrogant, and super-spiritual. He may hope for an eternity to be with God and with other believers, yet he can be cold and distant. But love — true love — has no weaknesses or dangers. Love never fails, never comes short. But remember: love is not indulgence and license. Love involves control and discipline as well as care and giving, selflessness and sacrifice. ■