

Lesson 13 | May 26, 2024

Love Is the Most Excellent Way

Study Text: Matthew 22:36–40; Romans 13:8–10; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13

Central Truth: Love is the greatest Christian virtue.

Key Verse: 1 Corinthians 13:13

Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity (KJV). Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love (NLT).

Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to describe Christian love.
- Students will recognize love is greater than any spiritual gift and is the highest Christian virtue.
- Students will choose to walk in the Spirit and live out Christ's love.

Introducing the Study

Say: The first and primary fruit of the Spirit is love. It lays the foundation for the other fruit Paul lists in Galatians 5:22–23. In fact, every New Testament passage that lists and discusses the gifts of the Spirit mandates they be exercised in love. Love is the most excellent way to stay in step with the Spirit, so let's conclude our study of the fruit of the Spirit by digging deeper into this concept.

Opening Activity—Songs of Love

Ask: What popular songs can you name—Christian or otherwise—that include the word love in their titles?

Say: The song of Christian love in 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most beautiful chapters in the Bible. It's often read at weddings to describe the ideal loving relationship. It may have been written by another author before Paul's time, but Paul included it in his first letter to the Corinthians, placing it just after his introduction to the gifts of the Spirit (12:1–11) and just before his detailed discussion of how the gifts operate (chapter 14). Love is not simply an option for believers; it is the only way to walk in the Spirit. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

This lesson dives deep into 1 Corinthians 13. After explaining why a Christian community needs love, the chapter describes the nature of love—what it is, what it isn't, and what it does—before concluding with the declaration that love endures forever.

Part 1—Love Is Essential

Worthless Without Love

1 Corinthians 13:1–3

Say: Paul doesn't say spiritual gifts are useless or generosity is worthless without love. God can still use them to benefit others—as you may have witnessed—but they are of no personal benefit to the bearer if they aren't exercised with love. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Corinthian church was a dysfunctional, yet Pentecostal, congregation. Paul began his epistle by celebrating the fact they were enriched with all utterance and knowledge and were lacking no spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 1:4–8). Just prior to the love chapter, Paul's words could be translated: "You are being zealous [or jealous] for the greater gifts. And still, I will show to you an even more surpassing way [to be zealous]" (12:31). He begins his explanation of love by giving three reasons why a Christian cannot be fruitful without love.

1. Without love, I am offensive (13:1). While the purpose of spiritual gifts is to edify others (14:26) and it is love that edifies (8:1), the Corinthians seem to have prized the exhibition of the more sensational spiritual gifts. Worshippers in Corinth's pagan mystery religions used copper gongs and clashing cymbals to invoke their gods, drive away demons, or excite one another. This monotonous noise in the streets would have been as grating as a constantly barking dog. Paul asserts that speaking in tongues without love is just as offensive—whether the words are human or heavenly.

2. Without love, I am nothing (13:2). Paul countered the Corinthians' opinion that those who possessed spiritual gifts must be extremely significant people. Rather than arguing the value of the gifts is diminished without love, he contends that we are nothing without love—even if our ministry is spectacularly successful.

3. Without love, I gain nothing (verse 3). Paul uses two illustrations of self-sacrifice: giving away everything to feed the poor and submitting the body to be burned. Aren't these deeds inherently valuable to God? If such actions are motivated by self-interest instead of *agape* (selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love), nothing is gained. The effort is wasted, no matter how great the sacrifice.

Discuss

Without naming names, describe a time you may have witnessed someone operating in a genuine spiritual gift or demonstrating great generosity without love. What tipped you off to the lack of love?

Crux of the Law and the Prophets

Matthew 22:36–40

Say: When the Pharisees learned Jesus had successfully silenced the Sadducees, they decided to take their turn at attempting to trap Him with a question. "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" (Matthew 22:36, NLT). Jesus said to the legal expert who had asked the question, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (verse 37, KJV). "Love the Lord thy God" (from the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4–5—the credo of Judaism) is as

orthodox as one can get! But truly loving God with the whole heart, soul, and mind was something no one could ever boast of having achieved.

Jesus didn't stop there. Although He had been asked to identify the most important commandment, implying that there was only one, Jesus went on to add a second command from Leviticus 19:18. "A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:39, NLT). The first four of the Ten Commandments show responsibility to God, while the remaining six show responsibility toward others (Exodus 20:1–17). By answering the lawyer's question with two commandments instead of one, Jesus was accurately summarizing all ten commandments—plus the remainder of the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:40).

The original Ten Commandments contain mostly negative wording, setting boundaries that prohibit behavior that is disrespectful or harmful. Jesus' summary of the Law and the Prophets, however, was framed in the positive, demanding initiative and action. That is what makes His words so powerful and compelling.

Knowing the Law, reciting the Law, and debating the Law is not enough; it must be put into practice! For this legal expert who appears to have been strong in ethics and weak in relationships, Jesus' emphasis on love went straight to the heart. When loving God and loving our neighbors are our top two priorities, everything else in the Law is commentary.

Discuss

Can you imagine a legal expert not living out the law? Share an example if you choose. Give a few examples of laws, regulations, or policies (biblical, governmental, academic, etc.) that are stated in the negative and a few that are stated in the positive. Which seems to be more frequent? Why do you think this is so?

Resource Packet Item 1: Love in the Law and the Prophets

Distribute the worksheet and give students a few minutes to work on it, either individually or in small groups. Then discuss their responses.

Part 2—The Rule and Power of Love

The Debt of Love

Romans 13:8–10

Say: Romans 13 begins with a command to submit to authorities (verse 1). "Give to everyone what you owe them," Paul wrote. "Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority. Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another" (Romans 13:7–8, NLT). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Christ-followers have been forgiven of their sins and they should pay their bills, but there is one debt they can never be freed from—the obligation to love people. We are eternally indebted to Jesus. How could we ever pay Him back for all He's done? He told

us in Matthew 25:40, “[What] you did . . . to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me” (NLT). Loving others on His behalf is our enduring obligation.

Echoing Jesus, Paul explained, “If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God’s law” (Romans 13:8, NLT). Then he proceeds to list five of the Ten Commandments involving responsibilities to others: “Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet” (verse 9, KJV). “These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God’s law” (verses 9–10, NLT).

In one sense, love is the end of the Law, because it has its own moral compass. But more accurately, love *fulfills* the Law. Love intuitively discerns what true respect and compassion demand in each situation. It does no harm to its neighbor, just as the commandments prescribe. Murder robs people of life. Adultery robs people of their honor and family. Theft robs people of their possessions. A false witness robs people of their good reputation. Covetousness robs society of simplicity and contentment. All these behaviors harm our neighbors, but love seeks their highest good, thereby fulfilling the Law.

Resource Packet Item 2: Loving One Another

Distribute the worksheet and assign the Scriptures to individuals or small groups. After a few minutes, discuss students’ answers.

Discuss

- ? Describe a relationship in which you feel deeply indebted.
- ? How is this enduring obligation to love totally different from the kind of crushing debt that may be associated with finances?

The Nature of Love

1 Corinthians 13:4–7

Say: Before the New Testament was written, the Greek word *agape* (love) was not in common use. The incomparable love of God as seen in Jesus Christ required a new definition of the word. Transcending all human expressions of love, God lavishes His love without consideration of people’s worthiness. It’s a result of His gracious nature rather than any merit we may possess. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The kind of love that characterized Jesus must also characterize Christians or the world will not even recognize we belong to Him. First Corinthians 13:4–7 describes the nature of love: what it is, what it isn’t, and what it does. Paul used multiple verbs to describe *agape*, because loving people are active. There are certain things we choose to do (or not do) because we are being conformed to the character of Christ.

Because love is patient and kind, it faces up to the darkness in three directions:

1. Love faces up to the darkness in ourselves (verses 4–5). Recognizing and renouncing attitudes that do not honor God, love simply does not do certain things: It does not envy. It does not show off or brag. It does not puff itself up with arrogance. It does not behave rudely. It is not self-seeking or demanding.

2. Love faces up to the darkness in others (verses 5–6). Instead of blaming people who provoke us, love is not touchy or irritable. It has a long fuse. It keeps no record of wrongs—choosing to forget as well as forgive. Love resists that ugly streak in human nature that enjoys someone else’s failure. It does not celebrate injustice, but rejoices when the truth wins out.

3. Love faces up to the darkness around us (verse 7). Operating in gentleness and meekness, love does not rebel against God’s purpose and will. Choosing Christlike attitudes—even in the worst of times—love does the following things: It patiently bears all things, never giving up. It believes throughout all things, never losing faith. It hopes amid all things, never despairing. It endures all things, never losing sight of Jesus.

Discuss

? Which of love’s responses do you find most challenging: facing up to the darkness in yourself, the darkness in others, or the darkness around us?

? What would life be like without *agape*?

Part 3—Love Endures Forever

Greater than the Gifts

1 Corinthians 13:8–10

Say: Authentic *agape* cannot be manufactured on our own; it requires the work of the Holy Spirit. Only then will love *never* fail. God’s love never falls to pieces or loses its effectiveness. God’s love never gives out, even under the most intense and sustained pressure. God’s love keeps on reaching and keeps on caring; it’s a commitment of lovingkindness that never ends. *Agape* continues through life, beyond death, and into eternity. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Some of God’s most wonderful gifts will not last, including tongues, prophecy, and knowledge. In the perfection of our eternal communion with God, these gifts will become irrelevant. “Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture!” (1 Corinthians 13:8–9, NLT). These limited, finite functions serve the Church well in this temporal realm. “But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away” (verse 10, KJV).

Discuss

? Do you think there will be prayer in heaven? Explain your reasoning.

? What are you most looking forward to when “that which is perfect” has come?

Resource Packet Item 3: Through Love's Eyes

Distribute the worksheet and discuss the first half together. Then encourage students to complete the second half on their own.

Love Is Perfection

1 Corinthians 13:11–13

Say: When perfection comes, imperfection will pass away. Something that is complete makes something that is partial suddenly obsolete. Paul illustrates this truth in two ways: a child becoming an adult and a reflection being replaced with the real thing. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Love is permanent. When all the things we delight in are gone—material comforts, social status, even spiritual gifts—only love will remain (1 Corinthians 13:10). Love is of God; God is love. When everything else vanishes, God and love remain.

Love is complete. Paul makes this point by using two examples:

- Children simply cannot grasp all the concepts mature adults can, which limits their speech and reasoning. But when children grow up, they “put away childish things” (verse 11, NLT).
- Corinth was known for manufacturing the finest bronze mirrors available at the time. Unlike modern mirrors (introduced in the thirteenth century), these ancient mirrors produced an imperfect reflection. Even with the best mirror, seeing a reflected image is not the same as seeing a person face-to-face.

Today we see only reflections of God: in creation, in the gospel, and in Jesus. Even though Jesus is the perfect revelation of God's nature, our finite human minds can only partially grasp the infinite. Our knowledge is like a child's. But one day, the veil will be drawn aside. “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” (verse 12, NLT).

Love is supreme. The Corinthians had been concerned with tongues, prophecy, and knowledge, but Paul shifted their attention to three other qualities: faith, hope, and love. While we wait for the Kingdom to come in all its fullness, Paul encouraged us to:

- Focus on faith. Trust God's forgiveness, acceptance, goodness, and mercy.
- Hold on to hope. Be future-oriented, realizing we are on our way home to live in the presence of God.
- Live in love. As great as faith and hope are, love is still greater. One day faith will give way to sight and hope will give way to fulfillment, but love will remain. We should focus on loving one another now so the fellowship of the Christian community matches the fellowship we each have with Christ. Then one day we will enjoy complete unity with God and His love will be perfected in us (John 17:20–24).

Discuss

? Describe a time when the veil was lifted, and you had a moment of sudden revelation and insight from God. This is a glimpse of seeing Him face-to-face.

? Knowing that love lasts through eternity, what more can you do now to invest in that reality?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Love is the most excellent way! It is the means by which the Holy Spirit intends His fruit and gifts to function. It sums up the Law and the Prophets and is our only remaining debt. “Love is of God” (1 John 4:7, KJV) and “God is love” (verse 8). Christlike love is produced in us when we keep in step with the Spirit. It must be the rule of our whole lives until we see Jesus. On that day—when perfection has come—we will also be perfected in love. We may not see clearly now, but when He appears we will see Him clearly, and we will be like Him (3:2)! Even now, “all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image” (2 Corinthians 3:18, NLT).

Living It Out Ministry in Action

- This week, pay your ongoing debt to love others by intentionally mirroring the love of Christ.
- Catch yourself when you’re tempted to be irritable or easily angered. Refuse to be rude.
- Find a specific way to show kind or generous love without drawing attention to yourself.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Love at All Times.
Exodus 23:1–9

Tuesday:

Love Covers All Sins.
Proverbs 10:6–12

Wednesday:

Angered by God’s Love.
Jonah 4:1–11

Thursday:

Love God Wholeheartedly.
Mark 12:28–34

Friday:

Encourage Others to Love.
Hebrews 10:19–25

Saturday:

Love One Another.

1 John 3:11–18