

FOLLOW THE WAY OF LOVE

12 ²⁸Now in the church God has first appointed those who are apostles; second, [those who are] prophets; third, [those who are] teachers; then [those who perform] miracles; then [those with] gifts of healing, [those with gifts for] helping [others, those with the gift of] leadership, [those with the gift of speaking different] languages. ²⁹Not all are apostles. Not all are prophets. Not all are teachers. Not all can work miracles. ³⁰Not all have gifts of healing. Not everyone can speak [different] languages. Not everyone can interpret [different languages]. ³¹But earnestly desire the greater gifts.

And now I will show you a way [of life] that surpasses all else. **13** If I speak in the languages of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I have [the gift of] prophecy and understand every mystery and have all knowledge, and if I have [enough] faith to remove mountains, but if I do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it is no benefit to me.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not arrogant. ⁵It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it does not keep a record of wrongs. ⁶It does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It forgives all things, it believes all things, it hopes all things, it endures all things.

⁸Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will pass away. If there are [different] languages, they will cease. If there is knowledge, it will pass away—⁹for [at present] our knowledge is partial and our prophesying is [only] a partial [communication of future things]. ¹⁰But when the perfect has come, the partial shall pass away. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; but when I became a man, I set aside the ways of childhood. ¹²At present we see an obscure image in a mirror, but then [we will see] face to face. At present I know [things] partially; but then I will know fully, just as I am fully known. ¹³Now then, these three things will continue [forever]: faith, hope, love—and the greatest of them is love. **14** Follow the [way of] love. (1 Cor. 12:28-14:1)

Introduction

After accompanying his mother through a stay at the hospital, an editor for the newspaper, *USA Today*, was amazed by the “miracles” of modern medicine—but he was disheartened to find a missing factor.

On the one hand, he found that the hospital was able to perform the medical procedures that just a few years ago were the stuff of science fiction. But on the other hand, he found that the hospital provided the kind of personal care you would not even accept from “the cheapest motel.” The highly skilled hospital staff was able to perform medical wonders, but their insensitive treatment often left the man’s poor mother in tears. (*Our Daily Bread*, 6/28/92)

What this newspaper editor discovered was that in the midst of medical marvels the missing factor was tender, personal care—in a word, love. What the editor encountered at the large city hospital is similar to the situation that prevailed in the

Corinthian church. Here was a congregation that was rich in spiritual gifts and spiritual experiences, but lacking in love. In the midst of a dynamic, miracle-minded congregation there was a missing factor: Christian love.

Although we should be interested in all the gifts and graces Christ has bestowed upon His church, our greatest concern should be the practice of Christian love. Because love is the greatest of all Christian graces, we are commanded to follow the way of love.

I. Follow the Way of Love, Because Love is Superior to Every Other Grace (12:28-13:3)

In verse 28 Paul presents some of the offices and gifts Christ has bestowed upon His church. Of first priority were the apostles—they were eyewitnesses of the risen Lord who were entrusted with the New Testament revelation. Speaking of himself and his fellow apostles, Paul declares, *“men ought to view us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God”* (1 Cor. 4:1.) Ranking second in terms of importance were the prophets. Prior to the completion of the New Testament canon, the prophets served a vital ministry in the church. They bore witness to the apostolic writings; as noted previously, in 1 Corinthians 14:37 Paul appeals to the prophets within the Corinthian church to verify the fact that he is communicating the very word of Christ: *“If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command.”* Perhaps the New Testament prophets also played a vital role in interpreting the apostolic writings; whereas today, with the completed canon of Scripture, we live under the principle that one portion of Scripture serves to interpret another portion. Ranking third in order of importance to the life and ministry of the church were the teachers. Their function, then as today, is to instruct the church in the Scriptures and prepare the church for active service to Christ and to one another in Christ’s name, note Ephesians 4:11-12, *“[Christ] who gave ... some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”* Next Paul mentions *“those who perform miracles”*—this was the working of miracles that bore a unique and powerful witness to the truth of the gospel, note Hebrews 2:3b-4, *“This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”* The apostle then completes the listing of spiritual gifts by including: *“[those with] gifts of healing, [those with gifts for] helping [others, those with the gift of] leadership, [those with the gift of speaking different] languages.”*

In verses 29-30 Paul points out that not every Christian has the same gifts or is called to the same office. Note that there is not only a diversity of gifts, there is also a hierarchy of gifts, as is evidenced from the apostle’s ranking of the gifts in terms of importance for the life of the church: *“first, ... apostles, second ... prophets,”* etc. The fact that there is a hierarchy of spiritual gifts gives rise to the

potential for envy and jealousy on the one hand, and pride and arrogance on the other—if two things are not appreciated. First, it must be understood that all of the gifts and offices and each of them are sovereignly bestowed by the Holy Spirit: *“Now the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the common good ...¹¹ ... the one and the same Spirit does all these things, distributing gifts to each one individually just as he desires”* (1 Cor. 12:7,11.) Second, we must realize that love is superior to all of the gifts and offices, this is the truth the apostle will develop throughout this present passage of 1 Corinthians.

In verse 31, without disparaging any of the gifts, (because they all come from God,) Paul finds it necessary to exhort the Corinthians to *“earnestly desire the greater gifts”*—the gifts that are more fundamental and more universally useful. The Greek term, ζηλώω, translated, *“desire,”* has the meaning, “to be deeply concerned about something; to show a great interest in something;” in other words, to appreciate something. The Corinthians had exhibited an undue fascination with some of the lesser gifts, especially the gift of speaking in different languages, the apostle will address this matter in detail in chapter 14; note especially 1 Corinthians 14:4-5,

The one who speaks in a [different] language is edifying himself. But the one who prophesies is edifying the church. ⁵Now I wish that all of you could speak in [different] languages; but more than that, [I wish that all of you] could prophesy. The one who prophesies is [of] greater [value] than the one who speaks in a [different] language—unless he is able to interpret—so that the church may be edified. (1 Cor. 14:4-5)

Beyond his concern that the church should have a properly balanced appreciation for the gifts of the Spirit, the apostle desires the church to pursue the best course: to follow the way of love. Note: Even though he may not possess the particular gifts or offices he personally finds most attractive or desirable, every Christian can and should pursue the way of love and cultivate that spiritual fruit.

In 13:1-3 the Apostle Paul explains the superiority and the indispensability of love. Love is superior to the ability to speak in different languages (vs. 1.) No matter how great it may be—*“if I speak in the languages of men and of angels”*—the gift of speaking in different languages is insufficient and intensely irksome—it is compared to a clanging cymbal—if it is employed apart from love. Love is superior to prophecy (vs. 2.) Even in their greatest manifestation, the gifts of prophecy, knowledge and faith are insufficient when exercised in the absence of love. Even the greatest acts of self-sacrifice, if done from any motive other than love, are of no personal benefit (vs. 3.) The apostle makes us aware that even great acts of self-sacrifice may originate from unholy motives, such as a futile effort to earn one’s own salvation, or an effort to gain the praise of men, something against which the Lord Jesus warned: *“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in*

full" (Matt. 6:2.) It should be noted that in verses 1-3 Paul is speaking in the most emphatic, even hyperbolic, terms in order to emphasize the supreme significance of Christian love.

Let us follow the way of love, because love is superior to every other grace. God desires that all good deeds be performed from the motivation of love, and that all spiritual gifts be exercised in the spirit of love. This is His desire because self-giving love is the summation of the law:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not covet, and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule, Love your neighbor as yourself. ¹⁰Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Rom. 13:8-10)

Furthermore, self-giving love is an expression of the very nature of God Himself:

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 Jn. 4:8-10)

II. Follow the Way of Love, Because Love is Eternal (13:8-13)

In 13:8, the apostle defines love as being durable and lasting: "*love never fails.*" He literally writes, love never "*falls*" (πίπτω.) That is to say, love is abiding and eternal.

In its quality of being durable and eternal, love is contrasted with the spiritual gifts, especially the gifts of tongues, prophecy, and knowledge. The common characteristic of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge is the fact that they are all temporary. These particular gifts served a significant function, especially during the formative period of the church, but they certainly do not continue to operate beyond the end of church history in the eternal state.

In verses 9-10 the apostle's point is that the spiritual gifts, (especially those mentioned in verse 8,) are temporary due to the fact that they operate within and belong to this present age, which is characterized by the partial and incomplete and is itself passing away: "*[at present] our knowledge is partial and our prophesying is [only] a partial [communication of future things.]*" Quantitatively, our knowledge is incomplete, it is not exhaustive and all-comprehensive, note 1 Corinthians 8:2, "*If anyone thinks that he knows anything exhaustively, he does not yet know as he ought to know.*" Qualitatively, at present there is a measure of obscurity concerning spiritual things: "*at present we see an obscure image in a*

mirror, but then we will see face to face" (vs. 12)—the ancient mirror was a piece of polished brass and the reflected image was very obscure.

But all this does not mean that our present spiritual knowledge is inaccurate or defective; it is divine revelation, but it is not yet complete or exhaustive revelation: *"when the perfect has come, the partial shall pass away."* *"The perfect [age]"* is the eternal state ushered in by the return of Christ in glory, note 1 John 3:2, *"Beloved, now we are children of God, but what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."*

In verse 11 Paul goes on to illustrate the point he has been making. Just as the attitudes that belong to childhood are left behind when we attain adulthood; so, likewise, spiritual gifts—which belong to this present age—will be done away with when the eternal state arrives. In the eternal state we will no longer need the gift of speaking in different languages, the gift of prophecy, or words of knowledge, because we will all see God face to face and receive His revelation directly. As the LORD promises through the prophet Jeremiah, *"No longer shall each man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them"* (Jer. 31:34.)

In contrast to the spiritual gifts and offices that are temporary, the apostle presents three abiding (eternal) spiritual attributes (vs. 13.) The first of these is *"faith"*—faith in the sense of confident, child-like dependence; we shall have faith in God our Father for all of eternity, indeed, we shall come to trust Him completely and perfectly. The second is *"hope"*—hope in the sense of confident expectation; we shall always anticipate and receive more new blessings from our God and Father who is the infinite Creator, whose *"greatness is unsearchable"* (Psl. 145:3.) The third is *"love"*—this is the greatest of these three spiritual attributes because it is the ultimate expression and the very essence of God's divine nature: *"God is love"* (1 Jn. 4:16b.)

Let us follow the way of love, because love is eternal.

III. Follow the Way of Love, As Love is Defined in I Corinthians 13:4-7

In verses 4-7 Paul is literally describing *"the love"* (vs.4.) That is to say, love in its true, pure form, love as it is revealed in the person and life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, we may look at the life of the Lord Jesus to see illustrated a working definition of the various elements of love mentioned by the apostle here in 1 Corinthians 13.

"Love is patient" (or, *"longsuffering."*)

Speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ, the writer of Hebrews exhorts us, *“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men”* (Heb. 12:3.) The Apostle Peter reminds us, *“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly”* (1 Pet. 2:23.)

“Love is kind.”

The kindness of our Lord Jesus is witnessed in His reception of the little children who were being brought to Him: *“People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them ... ¹⁶And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.”* (Mk. 10:13-14,16)

Another example of His kindness expressed in loving condescension, is His putting Himself at the disposal of the blind beggar, Bartimaeus: *“Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! ⁴⁸Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me! ⁴⁹Jesus stopped and said, Call him. So they called to the blind man, Cheer up! On your feet! He is calling you. ⁵⁰Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. ⁵¹What do you want me to do for you? Jesus asked him. The blind man said, Rabbi, I want to see. ⁵²Go, said Jesus, your faith has healed you. Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.”* (Mk. 10:46-52)

“Love does not envy.”

Love does not harbor ill will and enmity against those who enjoy privileges and possessions we ourselves may lack; likewise, love does not exhibit the attitude of wanting to selfishly clutch what we possess and refuse to share it with anyone else. Jesus demonstrates such love when He testifies to His disciples, *“I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you”* (Jn. 15:15) Far from selfishly clutching to His divine possessions, He lovingly shares all He is and has with those who believe in Him and become His disciples.

“Love does not boast.”

Love does not entertain the attitude of superiority and aloofness. The Lord Jesus, as the eternal Son of God, equal with the Father, did not stand aloof from His people; on the contrary, in His incarnation He willingly assumed our

humanity: *“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil”* (Heb. 2:11,14)

“Love is not arrogant.”

Love does not display an expression of superiority—because it does not entertain such an attitude. We witness our Lord’s self-abasing condescension exhibited in the incident of His washing His disciples’ feet: *“[Jesus] got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him”* (Jn. 13:4-5.) In so doing, Jesus was performing a task reserved for the lowliest of household servants—but out of love, He assumed such a role for His disciples and for our salvation.

“Love is not rude,” (or, *“Love does not behave in a dishonorable manner.”*)

Love does not behave improperly; it does not behave in a way that is rude or shameful; rather, it conducts itself in a holy, godly, dignified manner; it conducts itself in a gracious and reverent manner. Our Lord Jesus Christ displayed this attribute of love when He refused to disgrace Himself by putting on a show of miraculous power to impress Herod; rather, He maintained a dignified silence, even in the midst of the vehement accusations of the Jewish leaders:

When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had wanted to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. ⁹He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. (Lk. 23:8-11)

“Love is not self-seeking.”

Love does not seek to have its own way or seek its own self-interests; it does not pursue its own personal agenda. because it does not have such an agenda. The Apostle Paul testifies of this attribute exhibited in the life of the Lord Jesus when he exhorts us, *“Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus: ⁶[although] existing in the form of God, he did not consider the being on an equality with God a thing to be exploited; ⁷on the contrary, he emptied himself by taking the form of a servant”* (Phil. 2:5-7.) Although He shared in the deity of God the Father, our Lord Jesus did not view His divine prerogative as something to be selfishly clutched for His own personal benefit. Love, the epitome of which is found in the person of the Lord Jesus

Christ, does not pursue its own personal agenda because it does not have such an agenda. Jesus' sole agenda was to please His Father by accomplishing the Father's will: *"Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, Sit here while I go over there and pray ...³⁹Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."* (Matt. 26:36,39)

"Love is not easily angered," (or, *"Love is not provoked."*)

Our Lord Jesus refused to allow Himself to become provoked by the unjust treatment He received at the hands of the Jewish leaders; rather than allowing their provocative behavior to deter Him from accomplishing the Father's will, He silently endured such treatment:

"Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled ...⁵⁹The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.⁶⁰But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward⁶¹and declared, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.⁶²Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?⁶³But Jesus remained silent." (Matt. 26:57,59-63a)

"Love does not keep a record of wrongs."

As He hung upon the cross our Lord's prayer to His Father with regard to His enemies was: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"* (Lk. 23:34)

"Love does not delight in evil; but rejoices with the truth."

Even our Lord's enemies acknowledged Him to be a man of absolute integrity, wholly committed to the truth of God: *"Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to trap him in his words.¹⁴They came to him and said, Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You are not swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth."* (Mk. 12:13-14a) The Apostle Peter describes our Lord Jesus in these terms, *"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth"* (1 Pet. 2:22.)

“Love forgives all things.”

The word here translated, “forgives,” (στέγω), literally means, “to cover,” and seems to be used in the sense of “covering over transgressions rather than seeking retaliation or revenge,” note Proverbs 10:12, *“Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers all wrongs.”* Love tolerates offenses against itself, forgives such offenses, or gives them over to God, rather than making an issue of them and seeking personal retaliation; this is precisely what we witness in the life of the Lord Jesus: *“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself [note: the Greek pronoun may be translated either as “himself” or “his cause”] to him who judges justly”* (1 Pet. 2:23.)

“Love believes all things.”

Love displays an open, trusting, and accepting spirit, as opposed to a suspicious, defensive, self-protective spirit. Whereas the Pharisees abstained from any dealings with the common “sinners” of society, our Lord Jesus, motivated by love, willingly associated with them and did not seek to avoid them out of fear for His own safety or reputation: *“Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”* (Lk. 15:1-2)

“Love hopes all things.”

Love exhibits an unshakable confidence in the faithfulness of God; it entertains a positive, confident outlook based upon trust in God. Our Lord Jesus yielded Himself unto God His Father, confident that the Father would raise Him from the dead, even as He had promised: *“Jesus called out with a loud voice, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. When he had said this, he breathed his last”* (Lk. 23:46)

“Love endures all things.”

The Book of Hebrews exhorts us: *“Let us focus our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men.”* (Heb. 12:2-3)

Remembering our Lord’s words recorded in Matthew 11:29—*“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me”*—let us follow the way of love, as that way is defined for us in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 and revealed in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

As Christians, we should be interested in all the gifts and graces Christ has bestowed upon His church; but our greatest concern should be the practice of Christian love. Because love is the greatest of all Christian graces, let us heed the commandment of Scripture to follow the way of love.