



### 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

13 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

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#### [READ THE TEXT]

“People of God, this is the Word of God!”

Congregation - “Thanks be to God!”

[PRAY FOR UNDERSTANDING]

Good morning! If I haven’t had the chance to meet you yet, I’m Onan Coca, one of the pastors here at Highlands Community Church, and I am grateful to worship with you on this Lord’s Day.

This morning, we continue our expository journey through Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians in our series titled “**Uncommon Sense: God’s Wisdom over Man’s Pride through a Flawed Church.**” And if there is any passage in this letter that exposes just how upside-down human wisdom can be, it is 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

Few chapters in all of Scripture are more famous, and few are more misunderstood.

Most of us first encountered 1 Corinthians 13 not in a church discipline meeting, or a sermon on spiritual gifts, or a rebuke of pride, but at a wedding. If you’ve ever been to a wedding, you’ve likely sat in a chapel or a vineyard, the bride processing, the music swelling, and a well-meaning officiant reading, “*Love is patient, love is kind...*” while everyone smiles, wipes tears, and thinks, “*Yes, this is what marriage should be.*”



And that’s not wrong. Christian marriage should absolutely reflect this kind of love.

But here’s the problem: **that setting often trains us to hear this chapter sentimentally rather than soberly.**

At weddings, this passage feels warm and aspirational. In Corinth, it landed like a scolding.

Paul is not writing to starry-eyed couples making vows. He is writing to a fractured church filled with rivalry, arrogance, division, and spiritual pride.

Chapter 13 isn’t framed by romance; it’s framed by rebuke. Not by harmony, but by chaos. Not by unity, but by competition.

So when Paul says, *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love...”* he is not offering poetry for an open-mic night at the church. He is dismantling the Corinthians’ self-confidence.

In other words, this chapter doesn’t ask, *“What does love feel like?”* It asks, *“What does love cost, and are you willing to pay it?”*

And that realization should reorient how we hear every word that follows. Because 1 Corinthians 13 is not a pause for some beautiful poetic interlude; it is a **confrontation.**

Paul purposefully places this chapter between chapters 12 and 14, where he addresses spiritual gifts, church disorder, pride, competition, and self-promotion. See, the Corinthians were gifted, knowledgeable, and confident, but they were not loving.

And so Paul delivers the devastating truth of the matter and tells the church in Corinth that **everything** they prize most amounts to **nothing** without love.

That brings us to our main idea.



## Main Idea

**Without love, even the most impressive Christian gifts, sacrifices, and achievements amount to nothing.**

Paul’s concern here is not whether the Corinthians had gifts; they did. Or if they were busy working, they were. Or even if they were doctrinally correct, they might have been. His concern is whether they are loving.

So let’s set the context – why does chapter 13 exist, particularly on the heels of Paul’s discussion of the sign gifts in chapter 12?

Well, in the previous 12 chapters, we have learned that the Corinthian church loved: being seen, being heard, being impressive, and being right. We’ve learned that the Corinthians valued giftedness more than godliness, knowledge more than maturity, and power more than people. So Paul writes to correct their understanding, not by minimizing gifts, which he brought up in chapter 12, but by reordering their priorities here in chapter 13, before he explains what the gifts are actually for in chapter 14.

Now, before he tells them *how* love behaves in vv. 4–7, he tells them *why* love is essential in vv. 1–3. And everything hinges on a particular meaning of this word “love” that Paul keeps using.

What does he mean when he says, “love?”

At this point in history, the Greeks had four different words for love. The word Paul uses repeatedly here in chapter 13 is **ἀγάπη (agapē)** (*ah-gah-pay*).

Not *eros*, which is romantic desire and where we get our word “erotic.”

Not *philia* (*fill-e a*), which is brotherly affection, and what the city of Philadelphia is named after.

Not *storgē* (*store-gay*), which means familial attachment.

Agapē is a:

- Self-giving love
- Voluntary or willful love



- Sacrificial love
- Covenant love

Agapē is the kind of love that seeks another’s highest good even at cost to oneself. Even when that cost is very great.

Now that we’re clear about what agapē love is, let me explain what it is not.

When Scripture speaks of love here, Paul is not appealing to the world’s definition of love. In our culture, love is often understood as affirmation, support, or acceptance. To love someone is to approve of their desires, validate their choices, and celebrate whatever they feel is true of themselves.

**But that is not biblical love.**

Agapē love does not seek the approval of the beloved; it seeks the good of the beloved. And Scripture is what defines that good... not by feelings or preferences, but by truth and holiness. God’s truth. God’s definition of Holiness.

That means agapē love sometimes does what worldly wisdom says feels “unloving.”

A parent who loves their child does not give in to every desire of their child. A doctor who loves a patient does not encourage them to embrace their delusions or revel in their sickness. And a Christian who loves their neighbor does not approve of the sin that destroys the soul.

This is why Paul will later say in this same chapter, “Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.” Love and truth are not competitors. They are companions. True love is always governed by truth, and truth must always be delivered in love.

Worldly love says, “If you love me, you will affirm me.” Biblical love says, “If I love you, I will seek your highest good, whether you like it or not, even at great cost to myself.”

And sometimes the most loving thing you can do is refuse to give someone what they want, because what they want would hurt them. This is the kind of love Paul



is talking about, not soft sentimentality, not emotional warmth, but holy, costly, Christ-shaped love.

And it is precisely this kind of love that the Corinthians lacked.

This is the love:

- God shows toward sinners (Romans 5:8) “<sup>8</sup> but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
- Christ commands His disciples to show one another (John 13:34) “<sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”
- The Spirit produces in believers (Galatians 5:22-23) “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

Friends, Galatians is telling us that agapē love is not natural to us. It does not arise from personality or temperament. Agapē love is supernatural, worked in us by the Spirit of God. And it flows from Christ Himself, who loved us not because we were lovely, **BUT** to make us lovely, and who gave Himself for sinners that hearts dead in selfishness might be made alive in love.

Before we move further, it’s important to remember what the LBCF 1689 teaches us about this Spirit-wrought fruit in chapter 16: it says that good works, including love, are **the fruit and evidence of a true and lively faith**, not the ground of our acceptance before God.

As we examine the structure of the text, Paul uses six illustrations, all governed by one repeated refrain:

*“Without love... nothing.”*

This text gives us three shattering truths for the person without love:

- Verse 1: Without love, **I produce nothing**



- Verse 2: Without love, **I am nothing**
- Verse 3: Without love, **I gain nothing**

Let’s walk through them.

### **I. Gifts Without Love Produce Nothing (v. 1)**

**“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 begins with tongues because they were the most prized and most abused gift in Corinth.

When he says, “tongues of men,” this tells us that he is referring to real, intelligible human languages; languages spoken by people, unknown to the speaker, but meaningful to hearers when interpreted. That is exactly how tongues function in Acts 2.

The miracle was not in the speech, but in the **comprehension**.

Men from many nations heard the mighty works of God proclaimed “**each in his own language.**” Tongues were a sign, not of personal spirituality, but of divine revelation being made known. They were a sign for the early church, proving to the hearers that Jesus Christ is God and that He rose from the dead.

Now Paul adds a phrase that often causes confusion: “and of angels.” We must be very careful here.

Paul is not teaching that angels possess a secret prayer language. Nowhere else in Scripture are we instructed about a distinct angelic dialect. Angels in the Bible speak **intelligibly** whenever their speech is recorded. This phrase, “and of angels,” functions rhetorically, not doctrinally.

Paul is doing what he does elsewhere in this chapter, pushing a hypothetical to the extreme. For example, in verse 2, he says:



"If I understand all mysteries and all knowledge..." No one understands **EVERYTHING**, but Paul is saying, "even if they did..." Or in verse 3: "If I give my body to be burned..." This is martyrdom at its most extreme.

So here Paul is saying, "Even if I could speak with the greatest eloquence imaginable, human or heavenly, without love, it means nothing."

In other words, this verse does not support the modern charismatic idea of unintelligible, ecstatic speech as a private prayer language. Quite the opposite.

Paul's concern throughout chapters 12-14 is intelligibility, edification, and order. Anything that draws attention to the speaker but fails to build up the church is, to Paul and to our God, noise, NOT worship.

**And so we must understand:** Even the most impressive speech, real or hypothetical, without love is spiritually hollow. Without love, none of what we say is profound; it's just a lot of **useless, noise**.

A clanging cymbal makes a sound but creates no music. A sounding gong draws attention but gives no beauty. It is loud, but entirely empty.

## II. Greatness Without Love Equals Nothing (v. 2)

**"And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."**

Wow. Now, Paul is just stacking the most impressive spiritual credentials that the Corinthians or we could imagine.

### A. Prophecy Without Love

You can proclaim truth boldly and still be loveless.

In Numbers 22, we see that the soothsayer Balaam spoke truth, but he also loved money more than God's people, and so he was judged and died in his sin. But Jeremiah and Paul spoke truth with tears because of their great love for the people.

You can speak the truth clearly. You can argue doctrine accurately. You can teach theology faithfully. And still, if love is absent, that truth, however accurate, fails to build up.



Let me make this very practical.

In the life of the church, it is possible to be right and still be unloving. A brother can correct someone publicly when a private conversation would have been better. A sister can win an argument but lose a relationship. One of us can insist on being heard rather than seeking to understand. And all of it can be defended under the banner of “truth.”

But Paul says that, truth wielded without love, does not build the body up; it bruises it.

Truth must always be spoken in love as **Ephesians 4:15** commands,

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

When truth is wielded without affection, humility, and patience, it might sound authoritative, but it doesn’t reflect Christ.

Right doctrine without love might silence an opponent, but it rarely restores a brother.

### **B. Knowledge Without Love**

You can understand every mystery. You can master doctrine. You can be Einstein or Elon Musk level brilliant, but knowledge without love produces pride, not maturity. **“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1).**

### **C. Faith Without Love**

Even mountain-moving faith, the confidence that God will act, amounts to nothing if love is absent. Paul’s conclusion should shock us. Even if all of these things are true of me, “I am nothing.”

Not merely *doing* nothing, this is **being** nothing. **Giftedness without love empties a person of spiritual value.**



Paul now moves from gifts to sacrifices.

### III. Sacrifice Without Love Gains Nothing (v. 3)

“If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

Extreme generosity can still be motivated by pride, guilt, fear, or a desire for recognition.

Even suffering, **even martyrdom**, can be loveless. After all, not all suffering is sanctified suffering. God is not impressed by a sacrifice that does not flow from love for Him and His people.

A person can die for a cause without ever loving God or His people. And Paul says, “**Even then, you gain nothing.**” God weighs motives; he weighs your heart, not just actions.

So, Paul has this painful summary for the people of Corinth, and for us:

- Without love, you produce nothing. You have no meaning.
- Without love, you are nothing. You have no identity.
- Without love, you gain nothing. You have no legacy.

**Life minus love equals *NOTHING*. Zero. Zilch. Nada.**

This is why Christ rebukes the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2: “You have abandoned the love you had at first.” Right doctrine remained. Endurance continued. Love disappeared.

And Christ was not pleased.

Now, let me pause here, because all of this might make you worry about your own heart. Your own problems with loving others well. Paul is **NOT** saying that imperfect love disqualifies a believer. He is saying that a complete absence of love



exposes a heart untouched by saving grace. Weak love may belong to a struggling saint, but no love belongs to the unregenerate.

This passage is especially vital for churches like ours to understand. Churches that care about truth, obedience, and hard work. These things are good, but without love they are meaningless.

- Love is not opposed to truth - **love brings truth to life!**
- Love is not emotionalism - **love is obedient self-sacrifice!**
- Love does not erase convictions - **love governs how we hold them!**

So, if Paul is right, and he is, **Without love, even the most impressive Christian gifts, sacrifices, and achievements amount to nothing.**

### **Call to Obey**

If that is Paul’s warning to Corinth, then the question for us is not whether we admire this chapter, but whether we obey it.

So what do we do with 1 Corinthians 13:1-3? As we come to our Call to Obey, what does obedience to this text look like for a church that loves truth, values doctrine, and prizes faithfulness? Let me leave you with three calls to obedience - not calls to sentimentality, but to Spirit-wrought, Christ-shaped love.

#### **1. Walk by the Spirit, not your own power.**

Church, agapē love is not something you can grit your teeth and produce.

You cannot manufacture it by discipline alone. You cannot conjure it by good intentions. You cannot sustain it by sheer willpower. This love is the fruit of the Spirit, not the product of religious works.

If you find your heart cold, irritable, impatient, or harsh toward others, the solution is not to “try harder to be loving,” but to return to Christ. Abide in Him. Confess your pride. Ask the Spirit to rule your desires. Walk in step with our Lord.



Brothers and sisters, the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead dwells in you, and He delights to produce love where selfishness once ruled.

## **2. Pursue unity through willing self-denial.**

Unity in the church is not sameness of opinion, preference, or personality. True Biblical unity is voluntary self-sacrifice for the good of the body. That means:

- Holding your convictions with humility
- Yielding your personal preferences for the sake of peace
- Choosing to be patient over being proven right
- Bearing with one another in love

Church, love does not ask, “*What am I entitled to?*” Love asks, “*What will most build up Christ’s people?*”

This is uncommon sense in a proud world, but it is the very wisdom of God.

## **3. Examine your motives before God.**

Paul’s warning in this passage is just as vital for us as it was for the Corinthians.

You can speak truth, know doctrine, exercise faith, give generously, and even suffer greatly, and still gain nothing if love is absent.

So ask yourself honestly:

- Why do I say what I say?
- Why do I serve the way I do?
- Why do I hold this position so tightly?

Ask not only, “*Is this true?*” But also, “*Is this loving?*”

Because God does not merely weigh our actions, He weighs our hearts.



## Conclusion:

The Corinthians thought they were strong because they were gifted. Paul shows them they were weak because they were loveless.

Friend, if you hear all of this and realize that love is absent from your life, hear this clearly:

Christ loved His enemies. Christ gave Himself for sinners. Christ bore wrath so that loveless rebels could be forgiven and transformed. If you would have love, you must first come to the One who is love. Repent. Believe. Trust in Christ. Because only those united to Christ by faith can bear this kind of love.

From here, Paul will go on in chapter 13 to describe love’s beauty (vv. 4–7), its permanence (vv. 8–12), and its supremacy (v. 13).

But first, he had to clear the ground:

**Because no gift matters without love. No sacrifice counts without love. No achievement lasts without love.**

**Without love, even the most impressive Christian gifts, sacrifices, and achievements amount to nothing.**

So brothers and sisters, let us pray, not merely for better doctrine, stronger faith, or greater impact, but that the Spirit of God would cause love to abound in us more and more, for the glory of Christ and the good of His church.

Amen. Please pray with me.

**[CLOSING PRAYER]**

**[COMMUNION]**

**[BENEDICTION]**

**[RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY]**

Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible  
John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*  
John Owen, [Communion with God](#)