

The Village Church – Rancho Santa Fe
Week #16 – Adult Bible Study
Study Notes

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

January 28 & 29, 2025

1. The text has been exploited as a type of “scriptural wedding vow” in our culture. While it is not a bad thing to lift up what biblical love is, the text is compromised from its full impact when taken out of the context of a word of teaching to a church that had lost its way.
2. This passage is originally an impassioned vision of the “more excellent way” in which members of the Corinthian church should treat one another.
3. The purpose of chapter 13 is to portray love as an essential condition, a thing that is absolutely necessary for the Christian life, and to insist that love must govern the exercise of all the gifts of the Spirit.
4. Paul is trying to reform the Corinthian’s understanding and practice of spiritual manifestations in worship. This is a direct continuation of Paul’s efforts to tease out the hybrid religion the leaders had formed between culture and gospel.
5. Paul is aiming at those whose claim to certain spiritual gifts diverts the message of Christ’s love away from the people and represents themselves as particularly special and loved because of their spiritual gifts
6. It is helpful to set aside two common misunderstandings of this chapter.

First, Paul doesn’t write about love to debunk tongues and other spiritual gifts. His point is not that love should supersede spiritual gifts but that it should govern their use in the church, as chapter 14 clearly demonstrates.

Second, love is not merely a feeling or an attitude; Rather, love is the generic name for specific actions of patient and costly service to others.
7. The first unit of the chapter, verses 1-3, consists of three sentences that describe various religious practices, all of which are declared futile where love is not present:
 - Speaking in tongues
 - Prophesying, receiving revealed knowledge, `working miracles by faith
 - Ascetic deprivation

All are deemed worthless if not accompanied by love.
8. Paul’s intention is not to engage in controversy about tongues and other gifts of the Spirit. Instead, he merely wants to place them within the proper evaluative framework. By themselves, they are of no account.

9. Paul's broad formulation in these verses can be understood in two ways.

- On the one hand, he could be condemning “doing the right thing for the wrong reason” and calling for love as the proper motivation for religious practices.
- On the other hand, he could be condemning moral inconsistency (doing some of the right things but lacking love in other areas of one's life) and calling for love to be lived out in all aspects of existence.

Mobsters may donate millions to children's hospitals but continue to engage in racketeering, trafficking, and bribery; this is not a life lived out in love

- Both readings make good sense and there is no reason to exclude either.

10. The very placement of 1 Corinthians 13 suggests that Paul has an important agenda. He wedges this poem in the middle of his discussion about spiritual achievements. Here, he connects love and spiritual gifts to each other, saying, “Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts ...”

11. The Corinthian Church was not a homogenous body. Its members were not all of the same kind or ilk. This was not a comfortable gathering where people fell into step with each other because they shared fundamentally similar lives, values, and experiences—quite the contrary.

12. Paul remains firm that this diversity is non-negotiable. God has called this community to be diverse and to get along within it.

13. Paul's “poetic ode to love” was not written to celebrate the unifying love already accomplished in the community.¹ It was a call to action, not a tribute to what is. It was an intervention to instruct on what had not yet come to pass.

14. In his tribute to love, Paul starts out by naming human achievement as temporal and limited (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 8-12). Paul spills an enormous amount of ink describing these achievements and stations as necessary and desirable (1 Corinthians 12:27ff). In his love poem, Paul makes a decisive shift, diminishing the allure of spiritual gifts and functions.

15. Paul's declaration of love unifies us. Love is how we talk to each other, eat with one another, fellowship together, and affirm all. Love transcends our self-imposed caste systems and personal biases. It forms whole, holistic people who are anchored in the well-being of others.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE TODAY

1. Why is it so critical for biblical love to be the motivating factor in doing good things? Isn't it enough to be a good person, doing good things?
2. How might it change your understanding of what God expects from us if you viewed 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 as a definition rather than a prescription?
3. How do you view/understand the spiritual gifts that Paul refers to in these verses?
4. What spiritual gifts appear to be the most "popular" among your Christian community. How does the way people who are identified with specific spiritual gifts are looked upon by others (or themselves) find an echo in these verses?
5. How does Paul's notion of "love" manifest itself in our churches today? How is it still missing in some?

Notes by The Rev. Janice Y. Cook, Interim Associate Pastor, The Village Church RSF

RESOURCES

1. First Corinthians, Interpretation, Richard B. Hays
2. First Corinthians, New Covenant Commentary, B. J. Oropeza
3. First Letter to the Corinthians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Roy E. Ciampa and Brian Rosner
4. Feasting on the Word, David Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor Editors
5. Unveiling Paul's Women, Lucy Peppia