

The Corinthians were divided among themselves over spiritual gifts, elevating some and giving greater importance to the believers who exercised those gifts. Paul corrected the misplaced ranking of believers in chapter 12. But beyond this in all their enthusiasm for their favored gifts the Corinthians had missed the primary command for the follower of Jesus Christ to love God and to love one's neighbor.

Paul presents love in chapter 13 as the more excellent way (12:31), not a different manner of doing something, but a different path to take in life – a different lifestyle and a different way of thinking. Believers today need this same challenge for much the same reasons. We often miss the way. We value certain things in the Christian life, rightly or wrongly, but we fail to understand and practice the greatest command to love.

The gifts Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 were all greatly valued by the Corinthian believers, were all true spiritual gifts, and are each described in the superlative. They are marked off in sets by the phrase “but have not love.”

**I. The first “set”: the gift of tongues (13:1)**

1. *The situation:* “Tongues” was a true spiritual gift in the early church, but improperly elevated by the Corinthians from its relatively low place to a much higher place.
2. *The judgment:* The person who used this gift, even if he were extremely adept, but did not have love, was nothing more than a noise-maker. (Note that this is not a description of the content of tongues-speech, but an evaluation of the person speaking in tongues if they do not have love.) To exercise this gift in public with no concern for those around did not make the user important, but a simple noise-maker. But even in private, the tongues speaker who lived without love, was nothing better.
3. *The application:*
  - a. Those who believe in the validity of tongues for today should, of course, take direct warning.
  - b. It can also be an encouragement to those of us who struggle with communicating in another language. Although wishing for fluency and eloquence, without love, we would not benefit; but with a life of love, even those less than fluent are on the more excellent path.
  - c. By extension we can compare this with things given high visibility but which have low content or low potential to edify. Unfortunately this includes issues which most frequently divide churches like music styles or physical facilities. The most excellent way of love is needed.

**II. The second set: prophecy and faith (13:2)**

1. *The situation:* Prophecy was a true spiritual gift which Paul elevated because it edifies. Here he exaggerates it to the understanding of all mysteries (things hidden with God during the OT but revealed in the NT, especially concerning the work of Christ) and all knowledge (often having to do with applying truth). Faith is added to this, not the faith that all need to be saved, but the faith to do miracles as the context shows.
2. *The judgment:* Paul is clearly not devaluing the gift which he has elevated, but is cautioning the person who has the gift but does not have love. Despite the importance he gives to prophecy, the person does not profit from its exercise if they have no love. That person is a “nothing.”
3. *The application:* A parallel can be drawn to a correct striving for orthodoxy, believing correctly truth from Scripture. If prophecy that fathoms all mysteries leaves the loveless prophet as a nothing, how much more does our non-comprehensive striving for orthodoxy leave us as a nothing if we do not have love. (This does not diminish the importance of holding to Scripture correctly and completely; no more than Paul diminished prophecy. But without love, we are nothing. Cf. 2 Tim. 2:23-25 where there is an obvious union of love, e.g., kindness & gentleness, with orthodoxy, e.g., instructing and teaching.)

**III. The third set: giving to the point of self-sacrifice (13:3)**

1. *The situation:* Helping others (*cf.* 12:28) and giving generously (Romans 12:) are spiritual gifts and ones that were also valued in the culture. The word's basic meaning and its use in Romans 12:20 leads to the conclusion that here is meant giving away all that one has bit by bit to feed the poor until nothing is left. A somewhat preferred textual reading has “surrender my body that I might boast” instead of “surrender my body that I might be burnt.” The latter is often understood as martyrdom. The former as a reference to selling oneself into slavery to profit the poor or serving to the point of sickness or death.
2. *The judgment:* These actions are for the benefit of others but only appear as acts of love. The motive behind these acts might be wrong, e.g., for the sake of boasting (*cf.* Matt. 6:2) or to manipulate or out of fear, or the life context of the person doing them is not of love. An ultimate sacrifice of material possessions or bodily well-being, if done without love, brings that person absolutely no gain.
3. *The application:* Although we are commanded to physical and material help others, and especially other believers, it is easy to wrongly identify benevolent deeds with love. Even if an individual act is done in love, the question remains if our lives are characterized by being on the more excellent way of love. Is it our life-style? It is particularly condemning, that even as we try to give help to someone, we become impatient, unkind, etc. It is help without Biblical love.

The gifts which the Corinthians and Paul and even the culture valued did nothing for the possessors of those gifts, if they did not have love. The same is true for things we might value. It becomes clear that gifts of the Spirit can be exercised without the fruit of the Spirit. We need to be born of the Spirit and to live by the Spirit. Do not be lulled into a satisfaction with good things. Strive to follow the most excellent way: loving God and neighbor.