

October 25 Lesson 8 (NIV)

LOVE NEVER FAILS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Romans 12:9–21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 12:27–14:1

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–13

¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

KEY VERSE

Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. —1 Corinthians 13:13

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

Unit 2: Inclusive Love

LESSONS 5–8

LESSON OUTLINE

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HOW TO SAY IT

CorinthKor-inth.

CorinthiansKo-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Introduction

A. Global Success, Personal Failure

At the time of his death at age 56 in 2011, Steve Jobs's net worth exceeded \$10 billion. He was widely recognized not only as a leader in the technology industry but as a significant shaper of global culture. As the founder of Apple and then Pixar Animation, Jobs set new standards for innovation in consumer technology and corporate culture. Apple effectively created both the home computer and the desktop publishing industry, as well as *Toy Story*—the first fully computer-animated feature film. Jobs was also a major force in the development of streaming music and movies and touch-screen personal devices. Famous for bypassing market research, Jobs had an uncanny ability to intuitively sense what consumers would want, even before they realized they wanted it.

While Steve Jobs was a uniquely gifted individual who has left an indelible mark on many aspects of global culture, his personal life was less successful. Jobs fathered a child at age 23 and spent the first seven years of her life denying paternity. Although he eventually accepted her into

his family, she revealed in a 2018 memoir that Jobs was a difficult and demanding person to live with. Her testimony is consistent with numerous reports of Jobs's erratic behavior in the workplace. He fired people without notice or severance numerous times, famously asked inappropriate personal questions to prospective employees, and humiliated staff members by criticizing or even firing them publicly at meetings.

Steve Jobs was a profoundly gifted person who left a huge mark on the world while damaging many people around him because he didn't act in love. Our lesson today reminds us that love is the essential ingredient to all kinds of success—most importantly, for living as godly people.

B. Lesson Context

Corinth was a major city in ancient Greece. Paul spent 18 months in the city on his second missionary journey, despite much opposition there (Acts 18:1–17). Writing 1 Corinthians from Ephesus in about AD 56 while on his third missionary journey, Paul addressed a variety of issues and problems that had arisen in the Corinthian church in his absence.

That church's many problems seemed to have been rooted in pride, which went hand in hand with airs of spiritual superiority. Some thought themselves to be superior because they identified with a particular leader (1 Corinthians 1–4). Some thought themselves to be exempt from moral expectations (1 Corinthians 5–7). Some thought themselves to be superior because of the foods they ate or refused to eat (1 Corinthians 8–10). Some thought that they were so superior to other Christians that they could neglect the needs of others (1 Corinthians 11). The issue of spiritual gifts was also a problem at Corinth in this context.

Many individuals in the early church were empowered by the Spirit to accomplish important tasks, including miraculous manifestations such as prophecy (example: Acts 21:8–9) and speaking in tongues (example: 10:44–46). First Corinthians 12 begins a long section on the pride and arrogance that had entered the church through, ironically, the use of spiritual gifts. That discussion continues in chapter 14, but in the midst of it Paul pauses to offer a single, simple, concise answer to all the Corinthians' questions: love each other.

Love, properly understood, will put everything else into perspective, unifying the church and empowering believers to glorify Christ together.

I. Love Matters

(1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–3)

A. When Using Gifts (vv. 1–2)

1. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

Paul began with the example of an impressive gift, speaking in *tongues*. This gift of the Spirit was publicly displayed in the proclamation of the gospel at the church's inauguration at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11). In that context, the disciples' ability to speak a number of foreign languages symbolized the universal nature of the gospel: through Christ, people of different nations and cultures would come together as God's people. This in turn confirmed God's love for each person in all nations (Matthew 28:18–20; John 3:16). Ironically, the Corinthians had turned this power

into a source of division, requiring Paul to discuss the proper use of tongues in detail in 1 Corinthians 14.

The ability to speak languages by the Spirit's power is a marvelous thing. But how much more impressive to speak the very language used by the *angels* in Heaven! This would surely represent the highest form of the gift. Yet if a person were to speak that angelic language from selfish motives—to draw attention to oneself or prove his or her superiority—it would be of no use to anyone. As far as God is concerned, without *love* even the most elegant speech is just the noise of *a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal*.

2. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Paul turned to a second gift that is typically expressed in highly public settings, *prophecy*. While prophecy sometimes refers broadly to an ability to speak God's word to a particular situation (similar to modern preaching), Paul seemed to be thinking of the more obviously miraculous gift of knowing future events (see Acts 21:10–11). Suppose that someone was so gifted that he or she possessed *all knowledge* of future events, and even of divine *mysteries* of Heaven?

While we might regard the information such a person could share as priceless, it would be worthless, Paul said, if not exercised in *love*. *Faith* here refers to supernatural trust in God that would apparently express itself through great power in prayer (see 1 Corinthians 12:9). Jesus gives the example of people whose faith is so great that their prayers could move a mountain from one place to another (Matthew 17:20). Such faith would indeed be impressive to others, but Paul said that God will be impressed only if the prayer is offered in love.

REMOVING MOUNTAINS

The Gotthard Pass in Switzerland has been an important trade route from northern to southern Europe since the thirteenth century. This pass was slowly traversed on foot and later with horses, stagecoaches, and automobiles. In 1992, a majority of Swiss voters agreed on an ambitious solution to speed travel in the pass. They would remove parts of the mountain range to construct the world's longest and deepest railway traffic tunnel—the first flat, low-level route through the Swiss Alps.

The 35-mile Gotthard Base Tunnel took 17 years and \$12.5 billion to complete. About 31 million tons of material was removed. Tragically, nine workers died due to accidents during construction. In the end, however, mountains were literally moved, making it possible for up to 15,000 shipping containers to pass through the Alps each day.

The image of moving a mountain is used in Scripture to describe an act of great power (examples: Job 9:5; Matthew 17:20). But even (re) moving mountains means nothing if it is done without love.

—J. E.

B. When Sacrificing (v. 3)

3. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Generosity is not listed as a manifestation of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, but Paul does include it in his list of gifts in Romans 12:6–8. All people are obligated to give of their means, but some people are specially gifted with the ability to freely give to those in need.

There is a textual variant in this verse among the different ancient manuscripts. Some say, as reflected in the *King James Version*, “Though I give my body to be burned.” If this is the correct reading, Paul was probably referring to some act of Christian martyrdom. In that case, this phrase would fit the formula by describing the highest possible form of “giving”: it’s one thing to feed *the poor*; much more to sacrifice your life for the faith.

But some of the ancient manuscripts reflect the *New International Version’s* “If I ... give over my body to hardship that I may boast,” in which case Paul was perhaps referring to selling oneself into slavery. Once you’ve given all your money to the poor, you could theoretically raise more by hiring yourself out as a slave. Such an act would epitomize generosity.

Either way, acts of service and sacrifice—even martyrdom—can be twisted into something self-serving. Even acts that mimic God’s self-sacrificial gift in Jesus are invalidated when we do them to exalt ourselves rather than to bless others. Paul is one who dedicates himself completely to the Lord’s service, suffering great physical distress in the process (2 Corinthians 11:23–27).

Paul is referring to the ultimate in self-sacrifice. But even the most extreme act of sacrifice is worth nothing if we do it so we can boast about our own spirituality. Nothing we do is worth anything if our actions are not guided by genuine love for other people.

II. Love Acts

(1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–7)

A. What It Does (v. 4a)

4a. Love is patient, love is kind.

Paul defined love in terms of what love does and doesn’t do. Love is not an emotion but rather a lifestyle, a set of behaviors that reveal a spirit driven by true Christian love.

Love is patient emphasizes that love does not express itself through vengeance, retaliation, or by giving up on people quickly.

B. What It Does Not (vv. 4b–6)

4b. It does not envy,

Though we use the two words very similarly, jealousy and *envy* have distinct meanings throughout the Bible. Jealousy is often a strong desire to protect a faithful, committed relationship. The Bible sometimes refers to God as jealous in his love for his people because he desires them to be faithful to him (example: Zechariah 1:14). Envy is a desire to obtain what other people have, often accompanied by feelings of bitterness or hatred. Envy and covetousness are never motivated by genuine love.

4c. it does not boast, it is not proud.

At the same time, a person who loves does not try to make other people envious by bragging about the things that he or she has. Loving people are not prideful and do not seek to draw attention to what God has given them. Paul was thinking here especially of the pride that people might take in their spiritual gifts. Since all gifts are given by the same Spirit and all are of equal importance to the church (1 Corinthians 12:4–7), it is senseless to *boast* about them or to envy what someone else has received.

5a. It does not dishonor others,

Paul emphasized four things that people driven by love will *not* do. The Greek word translated *dishonor* is used one other time in the New Testament; in the other instance Paul suggested that unmarried men “might not be acting honorably” if they fail to follow through on a commitment to marry (1 Corinthians 7:36). Love does not lead us to do anything that we would be ashamed of later. Following from verse 4, Paul was probably thinking of envious or prideful things we might say.

5b. it is not self-seeking,

Pride and envy are categorically eliminated by the fact that love is not selfish, but instead is always acting in the best interests of others.

5c. it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love is not expressed in a hot temper. Of course, we may be angry at the sins that people commit and may be frustrated by their poor choices, but these feelings should be motivated by genuine concern that the person is doing something harmful to himself, others, or the cause of Christ.

For this reason, love is quick to forgive. *Keeps no record of wrongs* here means that we should not continue to harbor ill feelings toward those who make us angry. Instead, we should forgive what needs forgiving and forget the small stuff.

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

Many of the Corinthian Christians seem to have been arrogant about their spiritual gifts. We can easily become envious of, and resentful toward, arrogant people, and we may feel gratified to see them do something wrong because this justifies our judgmental attitude. Real love, however, always wants to see other people succeed and do the right thing.

C. Without Exception (v. 7)

7. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

This verse highlights four ways that a loving person treats others, with the repetition of *always* stressing that we are to act this way no matter what other people do. Love does not break under pressure but instead always *protects*. *Trusts* and *hopes* do not mean that loving people are naïve, but rather that love always remains positive. This attitude is tempered by the fact that love also *perseveres*. Far from wearing rose-colored glasses, loving people see the reality of situations and choose to love anyway.

Earlier in this letter, Paul drew a parallel between the Christian life and the athletic contests of running and boxing (1 Corinthians 9:24–27; compare Galatians 5:7; 2 Timothy 4:7). Though in

the middle of persevering we may think other people are enemies, our opponent is actually Satan and his influences. Instead of competing against others, we extend loving hands of patience, kindness, humility, etc., to help others cross the finish line with us.

III. Love Lasts **(1 CORINTHIANS 13:8–13)**

A. When the Gifts Run Out (v. 8)

8. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

This verse establishes a contrast between love and spiritual gifts. Paul selected three gifts from the list in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 that all reveal information about God and his will. The time will come when we will not need such revelations, but we will always need love in this life and the next.

B. When We Fully Know God (vv. 9–13)

9. For we know in part and we prophesy in part,

At present, our knowledge of God is limited. God is so great, so far beyond human comprehension, that it would be impossible for any human being to know all that there is to know about him. Indeed, human language could not express all that he is, and our finite minds could never fully grasp his perfection and holiness. As such, even prophecy can provide only a partial knowledge of God. Any person who takes pride in knowledge should realize that he or she doesn't know everything.

10. but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

This verse reads like a proverb, a general statement about how things work in this world. *Completeness* refers to maturity that lacks nothing. As a rule, things that are lacking become obsolete as soon as the full package becomes available. In this regard, one proposal is that the complete thing being referred to is the finalization of the New Testament. When that happens, *that what is in part*, referring to the previous verse, is obsolete. Regarding another theory, see verse 12, below.

11. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

This verse serves as an example of the principle in 1 Corinthians 13:10. A *child* thinks and talks according to his or her limited physical and mental capacity. But as we grow older, these simple ways of thinking are replaced by a more informed perspective, one based on a better understanding of the world around us.

12. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

As noted in 1 Corinthians 13:9, the revelatory gifts of knowledge, prophecy, and others like them grant believers partial knowledge. Paul therefore compared the knowledge of God we gain through these gifts to *a reflection in a mirror*. Ancient mirrors were made of polished metal rather

than glass and therefore could not provide a sharp image. Similarly, spiritual gifts give us an incomplete knowledge of God.

But Paul anticipated a time of seeing *face to face*. Scholars have various theories regarding what Paul was referring to. One theory is given with verse 10, above. Another theory is that Paul was thinking of the second coming (1 John 3:2; Revelation 15:3–4). Yet another proposes that Paul was referring more generally to life in Heaven, where we will dwell in God’s presence and behold his perfect glory. While some Bible students support their case by holding that *face to face* must be understood in its most literal sense of “in person” (2 John 12; etc.), others point to a figurative meaning of “clear communication” (see Exodus 33:11, 20).

13. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

The word *now* focuses the reader on present, earthly experience. At present, we must exhibit *faith*, trusting that he knows best.

Hope is not wishful thinking but rather is confident expectation. Hope will be out of place when we reach Heaven because, as Paul asked rhetorically, “hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?” (Romans 8:24).

But love will never be obsolete: it will continue to characterize our relationship with God and other redeemed saints forever. *Love* is therefore *the greatest* because it never ends. As such, when we exercise our gifts in a spirit of love, we are acting with eternity in view.

Conclusion

A. Not Optional

From the perspective of the world, love is not an essential ingredient in the use of gifts. A large financial donation still helps the needy even if the donor gives the money simply to save on income taxes. A gifted teacher can lead a powerful lesson that changes lives, even if the teacher only wishes to draw attention to himself or herself.

From God’s perspective, these efforts are of no value to the individual who exercises the gift because their exercise is not done with the right motive. Central to the Christian understanding of God is that he is loving. This becomes “real” for us when we have a relationship with him.

God is not a dispassionate Creator. The Lord God as revealed by Jesus is one who loves us in a personal way. God’s love is not based on our deservedness. Love is the guiding force in everything that God does and must be the guiding force in the life of anyone who wishes truly to serve him. It’s not optional.

B. Prayer

Father, take away our pride and envy, and help us to be truly loving and forgiving people. Give us the wisdom to use the gifts you have given us in humility and for your glory and honor. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Love never fails.