

The Way of Love

A C Thiselton's translation of 1 Corinthians 13

(1) If I were to speak with human or angelic tongues, but if I had not love, I would have become only a resonating jar or a reverberating cymbal. (2) And if I should have the gift of prophecy, and if I penetrate all the depths too profound for mere human discovery, and have all “knowledge,” and if I possess the gifts of every kind of faith sufficient to remove mountains—but, after all, may lack love, I am nothing. (3) Even if I should divide up all my possessions to feed the needy, and if I hand over my body that I may glory, but have not love, it counts for nothing.

(4) Love waits patiently; love shows kindness. Love does not burn with envy; does not brag—is not inflated with its own importance. (5) It does not behave with ill-mannered impropriety; is not preoccupied with the interests of the self; does not become exasperated into pique; does not keep a reckoning up of evil. (6) Love does not take pleasure at wrongdoing, but joyfully celebrates truth. (7) It never tires of support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, never gives up.

(8) Love never falls apart. Whether it be prophecies, these will be brought to an end; if it be tongues, these will stop; if it be “knowledge,” this will be rendered obsolete. (9) For we know in fragmentary ways, and we prophesy part by part. (10) But when the completed whole comes, what is piece by piece shall be done away. (11) When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, form opinions like a child, count values like a child; when I reached adulthood, I turned my back on the things of childhood. (12) For we are seeing the present only by means of a mirror indirectly; but then it will be face to face. For the present I come to know part by part; but then I shall come to know¹

This chapter is about the attitude or stance we have which shows itself, not in **what** we do, but in **how** we do it.

Paul ends his discussion on spiritual gifts with the exhortation to “strive for the greater gifts”. Now the Corinthians, on the whole, regarded a type of speaking in tongues as the greatest gift, a view based on what happened in pagan temples where speaking in tongues was highly regarded.

¹ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (pp. 1026–1027). W.B. Eerdmans.

What Paul now says is that it is not what you do but how you do it that really matters. “I will show you a most excellent way.” Note it is **way** and not **gift**. And this way is love.

What is love? What does the Bible mean by love.

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The English word love is used to translate various Greek words:

Storge – family affection. Used once in negative

Philia – can mean friendship but is sometimes synonymous with agape

Eros – popular word meaning passionate love. Not used in NT

Agape – unusual word.

The last word is very rare in classical Greek literature, but is the word most often used in the NT. It’s a bit like using word charity in place of the word love. Which is what the KJV of the Bible does. Agape covers all kinds of love but does have a focus on doing the good of the other person in the same way that God acts for our good.

Philia occurs quite often, sometimes with the idea of friendship and sometimes alongside agape with no real difference in meaning.

Storge relates to natural affection as found in the family. It is only used once and then in a negative way – without natural affection.

Eros was the most common word for love in Greek society. It referred to love based on desire for person or thing loved. It was passionate love that took hold of the individual who possessed this love, or rather was possessed by it. It was the love into which one fell. It is also a religious word. This word is deliberately avoided in the NT.

In this chapter, Paul is talking about agape, and that meaning of agape that is defined by the actions that he describes in the middle section.

In his book, The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God, Don Carson describes 5 different ways in that the Bible speaks of God’s love (agape).

Here is the list:

1. The peculiar love of the Father for the Son, and of the Son for the Father.
2. God’s providential love over all that he has made.
3. God’s salvific stance toward his fallen world.
4. God’s particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect.
5. Finally, God’s love is sometimes said to be directed toward his own people in a provisional or conditional way—conditioned, that is, on obedience.

In this passage love is not a gift, it is a way of exercising the gifts.

The status of the person exercising spiritual gifts.

One of the dangers of spiritual gifts was the status people attached to those who used the different gifts. In the previous chapter, Paul was at pains to point out that although there is a variety of gifts, there is only one source of the gifts and that is the Holy Spirit, who empowers the gift in the individual as the Spirit chooses and does so for the good of the whole church, and not that of the individual.

It is clear that in the church in Corinth, status was attached to the kind of gift that was exercised, as would have been in a pagan temple, with speaking in tongues providing the most status.

Paul makes it clear that without love, without one's primary reason for exercising a spiritual gift being the wellbeing of the church and one's fellow Christians, then the gifts bring no benefit to the user, and provide no real status. Exercising a gift, even the gift of tongues, does not make a person more spiritual than a person who does not exercise the gift of tongues. The same can be said about prophecy, and the other gifts. How often do Christians assess whether or not a person is a real Christian by whether or not they exercise certain gifts.

Paul first deals with speaking in tongues. Without love, even though a person may use the gift of Pentecost – speaking in human languages – or the gift of ecstatic worship – speaking in angelic tongues – without love, that person has no more status than the resonating brass jars that were used to amplify the voices of the actors in the pagan plays, or the clashing cymbals like those used in the worship of Dionysius, the Greek god of wine. Without love the spiritual status of a person speaking in tongues is no more than that of the sound system of the building.

Next Paul addresses the use of the other gifts associated with speech: prophecy, wisdom, and words of knowledge and also the gift of faith. A person using these gifts without love is a nobody.

What about a person who is amazingly generous, or is martyred because of they are a Christian. Without love, even these persons are not better off, as far as God is concerned, than a mean stingy person, or a person who avoids any form of persecution.

We need to understand what Paul is not saying. He is not saying that the exercise of these gifts without love does not benefit the community, it does. But it has no positive benefit for the individual who exercises that particular gift.

What do actions based on love look like?

Love does not determine what gift is exercised but how it is exercised. The Greek of this section is hard to translate into English. In English, it looks like Paul is describing love. But the Greek is clear. He is describing actions which are based on love. Love is seen in how the gifts are exercised by the individual with that gift, whether it be tongues, prophecy, faith, knowledge or any other gift.

(4) Love waits patiently; love shows kindness. Love does not burn with envy; does not brag—is not inflated with its own importance. (5) It does not behave with ill-mannered impropriety; is not preoccupied with the interests of the self; does not become exasperated into pique; does not keep a reckoning up of evil. (6) Love does not take pleasure at wrongdoing, but joyfully celebrates truth. (7) It never tires of support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, never gives up.²

Love waits patiently.

Love, Paul urges, **waits patiently** not only because it deals patiently with the loved one but also because it recognizes that *the right timing* plays a huge part in securing the welfare of the other.³

Love **shows kindness**.

Spicq observes that the word “suggests the warm, generous welcome the Christian always gives his brothers ... does his utmost to be thoughtful, helpful and kind, always in a pleasant way ..., and confirms the element of magnanimity in *agapē*.”⁴

Love does not burn with envy.

The **envy** which is carried over from a status-seeking, non-Christian Corinthian culture into the Christian church is not “of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 3:1–3), and is deemed to be incompatible with **love**, which *does not begrudge the status and honor of another, but delights in it for the sake of the other*.⁵

² Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1026). W.B. Eerdmans.

³ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1047). W.B. Eerdmans.

⁴ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1047). W.B. Eerdmans.

⁵ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1048). W.B. Eerdmans.

Love does not brag—is not inflated with its own importance⁶

Paul hammers home the incompatibility of love as respect and concern for the welfare of the other and obsessions about the status and attention accorded to the self. How much behavior among believers and even ministers is actually “attention seeking” designed to impress others with one’s own supposed importance? Some “spiritual songs” may appear to encourage, rather than discourage, this preoccupation with the self rather than with others and with God.⁷

A danger for conference speakers is that the focus of their talks can be on the gifts they exercise and the importance or impact of their exercise of those gifts.

Love does not behave with ill-mannered impropriety

Love does not elbow its way into conversations, worship services, or public institutions in a disruptive, discourteous, attention-seeking way. Insofar as courtesy (versus discourtesy) and politeness (versus impoliteness) relate to what is deemed publicly pleasing or displeasing, **love** does not rush in to impose its idiosyncrasies on those for whom bad manners are offensive.⁸

Love is not preoccupied with the interests of the self

Here there is definite contrast between agape love and eros love. The eros style of love, with its passion for the object of its desire, is taken up with its own feelings and responses. It says, “What is there in this for me?” It assesses value by “What do I get out of it?” Agape love asks, “How does the church benefit by this?”

By combining these last two descriptions, Paul is making comment on the behaviour of the Corinthian Christians already addressed in his letter.

(i) insisting on one’s way about idol food (10:24, 33); (ii) rushing ahead with the Lord’s Supper in a “better” room (the triclinium) while the latecomers are squeezed into the atrium (11:21–22); (iii) interrupting speakers with supposed “instant revelations” during worship, or alternatively carrying on at an inordinate length when someone else has an important contribution to make (14:29–33); and imposing

⁶ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1026). W.B. Eerdmans.

⁷ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1049). W.B. Eerdmans.

⁸ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1050). W.B. Eerdmans.

unintelligible tongues into a sequence of worship when the utterance cannot be communicated⁹

Love does not become exasperated into pique

This describes the feelings and response of those who are offended by the ill-mannered and self-seeking behaviour of those who exercise the gifts without love. What sort of love does such a person exhibit?

At Corinth, one group paraded their gifts and status with **ill-mannered impropriety** because they thoughtlessly ignored the well-being and feelings of others; the less gifted or less status-endowed group allowed themselves to become **exasperated into pique** at the aggressive triumphalism and ostentation of the others because they were more wrapped up in their own feelings than in sharing the sense of joy or liberation of others. Many local churches and many theological colleges contain *some who parade their “gifts” while others nurse their “hurts.” Does either side, Paul asks, genuinely put the other before the self?*¹⁰

Love does not keep a reckoning up of evil.

It does not keep a record of the wrongs others have done to one's self.

Love does not have “the habit still widespread even among Christians of keeping a reckoning of the faults of others.”¹¹

Love does not take pleasure at wrongdoing, but joyfully celebrates truth

No taint of evil can enhance or give pleasure to love, where love is genuine. Love takes no pleasure in someone else's failure, and delights in integrity and reality. If the situation is bad, love wants to help; if the situation is good, love wants to celebrate. It wants no hidden interests which disguise truth as something which it is not.¹²

⁹ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1051). W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁰ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (pp. 1052–1053). W.B. Eerdmans.

¹¹ Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1054). W.B. Eerdmans. Quoting Hering

¹² Thiselton, A. C. (2000). [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*](#) (p. 1056). W.B. Eerdmans.